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The English-language Reception of K.H. Miskotte

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Abstract: The Dutch pastor and theologian K.H. (Kornelis Heiko) Miskotte (1894–1976) is a celebrated figure in his home country of the Netherlands—but he is hardly known to English-speaking theology. This article summarizes Miskotte's modest English-language reception and describes a translation project to which its author is a co-contributor.

Keywords: K.H. Miskotte, biblical theology, Karl Barth, Martin Kessler, Brevard Childs, Christopher Seitz, Old Testament

K.H. (Kornelis Heiko) Miskotte (1894–1976) is a celebrated figure in his home country of the Netherlands. His sermon on Psalm 92:9a, for example—“God's enemies shall perish”—delivered after liberation from the Nazis on May 9, 1945, was an event of national significance. By contrast, Miskotte is hardly known in the English-speaking theological world. And while Miskotte himself mediated important intellectual works from other languages into Dutch, writing two books on Karl Barth alone, hardly anyone returned him the favor, at least as far as the English language is concerned: only two of Miskotte's publications have, at present, been translated into English, and only one book summarizes his life and theology. These resources are, in turn, appreciated and assigned in exceedingly few theological contexts. The goal of the present article is to introduce Miskotte and his significance; and to describe the few works that currently comprise Miskotte's English-language reception. The conclusion will address the translation project to which the article's author is a co-contributor, and which, it is hoped, will inspire more interest and engagement among English-speaking theologians. Miskotte's heroic

witness against Nazism, his deep anchoring in the Old Testament, and his God-centered vision offer a powerful and timely example for the Christian churches.

Before considering Miskotte's English-language career, a few more general words about his biography and impact are in order. Miskotte's principal theological contributions may be grouped under three headings: first, his mediation of Karl Barth; second, his theology of Judaism; and third, his emphasis on the primacy of the Old Testament. These three threads come together in his distinctive theological concept of *grondwoorden* or "ground-words," as noted below.

Miskotte was born in Utrecht in 1894, the firstborn son of a farmhand-turned-company-clerk. His family belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church and he, too, was catechized and confirmed there. Miskotte's mother, a pastor's daughter, was much influenced by Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge (1803–1875). Miskotte himself went to university in Utrecht and studied theology with their faculty as well. He began to pastor a small church in the village of Kortgene in 1921, at the age of twenty-seven. Later he pastored in Meppel (1925–1930), in Haarlem just outside of Amsterdam (1930–1938), and lastly, during the war years, in Amsterdam (1938–1945).

Miskotte was a vocal opponent of Nazism, at home and abroad. As early as 1936, he determined to write a book comparing the Icelandic epic, the Edda, with the biblical Torah, to showcase the fundamental incompatibility between a warlike, pagan way of life and the monotheistic Israelite one. This book was published in 1939, just before the German Army invaded the Netherlands, and, seeing themselves epitomized in the descriptions of the Edda, Nazi

censors banned it only months after its release.¹ Earlier in that same momentous year, Miskotte participated in a public debate with a bona fide Dutch Nazi pastor. Miskotte urged that the Amsterdam classis should make up its mind and commit wholeheartedly to resisting Nazism. It did not. During the German occupation, Miskotte's family hid Jewish refugees in their parsonage, and Miskotte participated in a resistance cell, moving from house to house to evade capture. Immediately after the war in 1945, Miskotte received an appointment from the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to become ecclesiastical professor at Leiden University. He taught dogmatics, ethics, ecclesiastical law, and missions until his retirement in 1959.²

Theology of Karl Barth. Miskotte is best known as an interpreter of the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth. While pastoring in 1923, he read Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* and, after initial misgivings, was soon won over to its program, in particular to what some scholars have called its "actualistic ontology."³ From this point onwards in his theological thought, Miskotte would describe God's being in terms of its *eventfulness* and *concreteness*. As Miskotte

¹ K.H. Miskotte, K.H. Miskotte, *Edda en Thora: Een vergelijking van Germaansche en Israëlitische religie* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1939); see Herman de Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte: Theoloog in de branding, 1894–1976* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2016), 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. Cf. also Henk Vreekamp, "Edda und Thora—siebzig Jahre später," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 53 (2010): 70–87.

² These biographical comments draw from de Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte*, and Martin Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte: A Biblical Theology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press/London: Associated University Presses, 1997). The detail about Miskotte moving from house to house is taken from Rinse Reeling Brouwer's foreword to the forthcoming English translation of *Biblical ABCs*.

³ For comprehensive coverage of this concept, see Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007). One among many entries on Miskotte's relation to Barth is Susanne Hennecke, "A Theology of Culture in the Mirror of its Barth-reception: the Dutch Theologian Kornelis Heiko Miskotte," in *Dogmatics after Barth: Facing Challenges in Church, Society and the Academy*, ed. Günter Thomas, Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, and Bruce McCormack (Leipzig: Create Space, 2012), 37–52.

writes in his wartime booklet *Biblical ABCs*, “the Word *happens*.”⁴ Divine self-disclosure “strikes”⁵ and, like lightning, its arrival is punctiliar, hitting a certain place and no other. “God,” Miskotte says, “does not appear to us as the most generic, that which can be found everywhere, but rather as the most unique, that which can be sought and found somewhere specific.”⁶ Miskotte began a correspondence with Barth—and a theological friendship—that lasted until Barth’s death in 1968.

Theology of Judaism. While pastoring full-time in Haarlem, Miskotte worked on a dissertation at the University of Groningen. His topic was “The Essence of Jewish Religion.” Once completed in 1932, it received the Mallinckrodt Prize in 1935 for best theological dissertation of the decade.⁷ Unusually for its time, it took a sympathetic and phenomenological approach to contemporary Jewish thinkers such as Herman Cohen, Max Brod, Franz Rosenzweig, Ernst Bloch, and Martin Buber. Rosenzweig especially became a lifelong intellectual inspiration to Miskotte; in fact, in his letters to Karl Barth, Miskotte urged him for decades to read Rosenzweig’s magnum opus, the *Star of Redemption*, but Barth never did.⁸

⁴ 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 tegoe 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. Except where noted, page references for *Biblical ABCs* in the present article correspond to the most recent, eighth Dutch edition (Utrecht: Kok, 2016), here 17. Italics are mine; in the Dutch, these words are capitalized as a kind of emphatic subtitle.

⁵ *Bijbels ABC*, 17.

⁶ *Bijbels ABC*, 42.

⁷ For more on the dissertation and its receipt of the Mallinckrodt prize, see de Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte*, 142–53; also Kessler, *Miskotte*, 34–37.

⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985). The correspondence between Barth and Miskotte can be found in: *Briefwissel, 1924–1968*, ed. Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991). On Miskotte and Rosenzweig, see Wolfram Liebster, “Franz Rosenzweig und Kornelis Heiko Miskotte: zu den Anfängen und den Auswirkungen des jüdisch-christlichen Dialoges in

Rosenzweig reinforced Miskotte's emphasis on the singular Word of God, and he also influenced the shape of that Word for Miskotte: like Rosenzweig, Miskotte identified the event of divine self-revelation with the Tetragrammaton (YHWH).⁹ The Name of God is for Miskotte "the A of the biblical ABCs."¹⁰ Miskotte also absorbed from Rosenzweig the notion of *beit midrash*, a house of instruction. In addition to being a site where God's Word touches down like lightning, scripture also exercises an ongoing, longitudinal, pedagogical function; it instructs and calls forth study. If the Word "strikes" (Dutch: *inslaat*), the Teaching or Torah "remains" (Dutch: *blijft*).¹¹

Primacy of the Old Testament. Miskotte thus speaks of the "twofold action of the scriptures": the scriptures are "both Word and teaching, voice and instruction, [divine] self-manifestation and [divine] direction."¹² But what Miskotte means by "scripture" is, first and foremost, the Old Testament. Whether in its aspect as divine address or divine pedagogy, the Old Testament takes precedence. Miskotte dedicates substantial space to the unity of the two testaments of the Christian Bible in their reference to the one God. At the same time, he criticizes the schemata by which Christians organize the contents of the testaments—type and antitype,

den Niederlanden," in "Wenn nicht jetzt, wann dann?" *Aufsätze für Hans-Joachim Kraus zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Georg Geyer (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983), 209–221.

⁹ On which, see Barbara E. Galli, "Rosenzweig and the Name of God," *Modern Judaism* 14 (1994): 63–86; for more on Miskotte's name-theology, see Sören Petershans, *Offenbarung des Namens und versöhntes Leben: eine Untersuchung zur Gotteslehre bei Kornelis Heiko Miskotte*, *Arbeiten zur Systematischen Theologie* 11 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016). Cf. the late John Webster: "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)" ("The Holiness and Love of God," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, T&T Clark Cornerstones [London: Bloomsbury, 2016 (orig. 2005)], 109–130, here 114).

¹⁰ *Bijbels ABC*, 40.

¹¹ *Bijbels ABC*, 17 and 26, respectively.

¹² K.H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 56; hereafter, *WGS*.

Law and Gospel, promise and fulfilment—because they demote the Old Testament in favor of the New. Instead, Miskotte emphasizes what he calls the “surplus” of the Old Testament: the theological elements that the Old Testament contains and which the New Testament does not, elements such as its anthropomorphic God, its experiences of suffering and pathos, or its explorations of politics and eroticism. “Compared with the New Testament,” then, the Old, he writes, “possesses a formal priority.”¹³

Grondwoorden. These three threads—Barth’s actualism, Rosenzweig’s Name-theology and educative interest, and the primacy of the Old Testament—coalesce for Miskotte in one, distinctive theological concept: *grondwoorden*, or, literally, “ground-words.” Miskotte’s writings are peppered with a variety of Dutch words formed from this *grond*-root: *grondlijnen*, *grondwoorden*, *grondstructuur*, *grondpatroon*. None of these have a precise English equivalent; John Doberstein translates the term “*grond*” as “basic.” Because of their inexact match to English and their importance for Miskotte’s program, I have treated them like a theological loanword (cf. German *Umwelt*). In Miskotte’s usage, *grondwoorden* refers to a selection of Hebrew terms that provide a fundamental, formal scaffolding for the entire Bible. The main task of his book *Biblical ABCs* is to lay out these building blocks of scriptural language, concepts like *torah*/teaching, *shem*/Name, *echad*/one, *ma’aseh*/deed, and so on. These run through the whole of scripture like aisle lights, coordinating and illuminating its contents and facilitating its instructional work. But they also adumbrate God’s being-in-act, and Miskotte therefore calls them divine “virtues” (Dutch: *deugden*).¹⁴ Naturally, too, given the priority of the Old Testament, these ground-words appear in Hebrew, but, since “the language of the New

¹³ WGS, 175.

¹⁴ *Bijbels ABC*, 60 and following. On page 62 Miskotte paraphrases: “divine perfections” (*volkomenheden van de Eeuwige*).

Testament finds its roots utterly and completely in the Old,” they can be found throughout that corpus as well.¹⁵ Miskotte’s *grondwoord* concept would play an important, even constitutive role in the so-called “Amsterdam School” of theology that grew up in his wake.¹⁶ The Dutch theologian Frans Breukelman, for instance, makes *grondwoorden* the centerpiece of his approach.¹⁷ The particularity of the proper-named God finds its complement and precipitate in the particular architecture of Hebrew scripture.

With these summary biographical and theological facts in hand, let us turn to Miskotte’s English-language reception. Some attention must be paid to his own relationship with the English language. As part of his gymnasium schooling (equivalent to North American high school), Miskotte studied Greek, Latin, French, English and German. The catalog of his personal library also lists many books in English, though many more in French and German. His writings feature occasional quotations from English-language works, especially those of literary or aesthetic note; Shakespeare, for example, appears about forty times in his published diaries. In spite of his ability to read English, Miskotte was uncomfortable speaking it in public. In 1964, the University of Glasgow awarded him an honorary doctorate. The dean of the Faculty of

¹⁵ This translates a sentence from the foreword (*Woord Vooraf*) peculiar to the 1941 edition of *Bijbels ABC*, here 4.

¹⁶ For more on the Amsterdam School, see Uwe F.W. Bauer, *All diese Worte: Impulse zur Schriftauslegung aus Amsterdam, expliziert an der Schilfmeererzählung in Exodus 13,17–14,31*, Europäische Hochschulschriften 23/Theologie Bd. 442 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1991), 25–146; also Martin Kessler, “Introduction,” in *Voices from Amsterdam: A Modern Tradition of Reading Narrative*, SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), ix–xxiv. For a comparison of Barth and Miskotte with regard to the form of biblical language, see Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, “Barths Forderung einer ‘Biblischen Haltung’ und Miskottes Alephbetisierung der Theologie,” *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 5 (1989): 21–36.

¹⁷ On Breukelman and *grondwoorden*, see his “*debarim*-studies” (*dabar* is Hebrew for “word”): Frans Breukelman, *Debharim: Der biblische Wirklichkeitsbegriff des Seins in der Tat*, *Biblische Theologie* II/1 (Kampen: Kok, 1998); also Bauer, *All diese Worte*, 93–98, and Karel Deurloo, “Biblische Theologie in Grundworten,” in *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 16 (2000): 89–92.

Divinity at that time, John Mauchline, wrote to Miskotte on May 11 of that year to ask him for a description of his career in church and theology and to invite him to attend the ceremony.

Miskotte's handwritten answer, dated May 17, begins in English for its first several lines before switching to German. Miskotte confesses at the transition-point: "I must say you, I never speak or write English since my youth, while about my thirtieth year German has become my second mother-tongue. And now I have not time to learn with a dictionary. On the whole, this handicap throws a shadow over my days in Glasgow." In fact, the Scottish university accommodated Miskotte, and he did not speak on the occasion of his receiving the honorary degree.¹⁸

Two years later in 1966, Harvard Divinity School, in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee, hosted a "Colloquium on Judaism and Christianity." Over a hundred scholars and theologians attended, and Miskotte himself contributed a paper—in English—titled "The Great Schism." This conference paper represents a revision and translation of a handwritten Dutch article dating from 1957 and archived at Leiden University Library; I am unsure who translated it on Miskotte's behalf. Special Collections at Harvard Divinity School possesses audio recordings of the colloquium; they show that Miskotte's paper was distributed and discussed, but neither he nor a proxy read it out loud. This paper is the earliest English-language outing by Miskotte, although it never circulated beyond the conference. A response to Miskotte's paper by W.D. Davies did enter print, as a short article in the *Harvard Theological Review*.¹⁹ A

¹⁸ The letter from the "Clerk of Senate" to Miskotte, dated 20 April, 1964, reads: "As for the Ceremony, there will be no question of your having to speak in public: so you need not worry about that."

¹⁹ W.D. Davies, "Torah and Dogma: A Comment," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 87–105.

German translation of Miskotte's paper by Brigitta Toet-Kahlert appeared as part of an edited collection in 1970.²⁰

The first and most important English reception of Miskotte occurred through the efforts of an American Lutheran, John W. Doberstein. Doberstein was a professor of practical theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where he had also received his divinity degree. In addition to pastoring and teaching, Doberstein engaged in a lifelong ministry of translation, beginning with the journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1942) and continuing on with *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954)—one of the earliest translations of a complete Bonhoeffer book—as well as a number of works by Helmut Thielicke. In his introduction to the 1967 English translation of Miskotte's *When the Gods are Silent*, Doberstein says that he had picked the book up in a publisher's bookstore in Munich (meaning the publisher Christian Kaiser; they had printed a German translation by Hinrich Stoevesandt in 1963).²¹ Doberstein writes of this initial encounter: "I was immediately struck by its challenging content and sophisticated style, though I had read a number of the author's articles in German theological periodicals. Further reading in an hotel room and a train increased my enthusiasm, and a few weeks later, visiting my friend Professor Georg Eichholz in Wuppertal...we shared the stimulation we both felt."²²

Doberstein went on to use the German translation, *Wenn die Götter schweigen*, as his base text for producing an English version; as his introduction spells out, the German constitutes

²⁰ K.H. Miskotte, "Das große schisma," in *Das Judentum als Frage an die Kirche*, ed. G. Harder and H. H. Eßer, trans. Brigitta Toet-Kahlert, Schriftenreihe für christlich-jüdische Begegnung 5 (Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag Rolf Brockhaus, 1970), 28–49.

²¹ K.H. Miskotte, *Wenn die Götter schweigen: Vom Sinn des Alten Testaments*, trans. Hinrich Stoevesandt (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1963).

²² John W. Doberstein, "Translator's Introduction," *WGS*, ix–xv, here ix.

an expansion and revision of the Dutch original, such that Miskotte considered it the “canonical” edition. Doberstein also thanks the German translator Stoevesandt for “making many things plain which might otherwise have been very obscure and difficult.”²³ Doberstein evidently made quick work of the translation, because his signature at the end of the introduction is dated January 1965. The book came out in 1967, but Doberstein did not see it; he suffered a heart attack and passed away in October 1965.

Doberstein’s translation of *When the Gods are Silent* generated few reviews, and these were not wholeheartedly positive. James Brown’s for the *Scottish Journal of Theology* is the most thorough; he indicates that he read it on the force of Helmut Gollwitzer’s praise for the German version.²⁴ Brown acknowledges the book’s difficult style but aims his criticism more at its Barthian condemnation of “religion,” a critique that was quite out of step with most English-language theology at that moment (Doberstein himself registers disagreement with this theological outlook in his introduction).²⁵ Gerhard Hasel’s review registers similar points.²⁶ Another review by John Bligh calls the book’s main contribution “a subtle, evanescent mysticism of the Name,” though it, too, critiques the book’s prose.²⁷ Ulrich Simon’s review commends its genius but says as follows: “Here is a book which is a failure in the grand manner. Every page confronts the reader with original thinking and tantalising insights, but the virtue of

²³ Doberstein, “Translator’s Introduction,” xv.

²⁴ James Brown, Review of *When the Gods are Silent*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 356–362, here 356. Helmut Gollwitzer’s high praise (“the theological book of the decade”) appeared in *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch, Library of Philosophy and Theology (London: SCM, 1965), 42; also, idem, Review of *Wenn die Götter schweigen*, *Evangelische Theologie* 23 (1963): 557–560.

²⁵ James Brown, Review, 362; Doberstein, “Translator’s Introduction,” x.

²⁶ Gerhard F. Hasel, Review of *When the Gods are Silent*, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 9 (1971): 176–179.

²⁷ John Bligh, Review of *When the Gods are Silent*, *Heythrop Journal* 9 (1969): 441–442.

unpredictable statements, inferences, polemics, and citations suffers from incompetent organization.”²⁸ Simon did in brief recognize the lineage and distinctiveness of Miskotte’s theological vision: “Miskotte the Barthian essentially parts company with his master in making unprecedented claims for the authority of YHWH as the disclosure of the Godhead, the *pars pro toto* incarnation.”²⁹ Perhaps the most positive, though brief, review came from John Rogerson.³⁰

In quick succession, Doberstein had pursued another Miskotte translation: but he was only halfway through his rendition of *The Roads of Prayer* when death interrupted. His longtime friend and collaborator, Theodore Tappert, completed the translation, though he is not credited on its front cover. The book was published in 1968.³¹ The front matter of *The Roads of Prayer* does not indicate that Doberstein or Tappert referred to the German translation of 1964, although this seems probable; if they used the Dutch original, that would make it their only translation directly out of Dutch.³² Doberstein’s personal papers, housed at the Lutheran Archives Center in Philadelphia, doubtless contain more information about his engagement with Miskotte, but they are uncatalogued (and I could not travel to the Lutheran Archives Center). A Franciscan sister, Mary de Sales Hoffman, wrote the only English-language review, a brief and laudatory entry for a periodical called *Sisters Today*.³³

²⁸ Ulrich Simon, Review of *When the Gods are Silent*, *Religious Studies* 6 (1970): 190–191, here 190.

²⁹ Simon, Review, 191.

³⁰ John W. Rogerson, “The Fourth Man,” *Modern Churchman* 12 (1969): 317–318.

³¹ K.H. Miskotte, *The Roads of Prayer*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968). Doberstein’s widow, Helen S. Doberstein, wrote the foreword (5).

³² Doberstein does say in his “Translator’s Introduction” to *WGS* that he consulted the Dutch original (xv).

³³ Mary de Sales Hoffman, Review of *The Roads of Prayer*, *Sisters Today* 40 (1969): 385.

English-language reception of Miskotte languished thereafter for a generation or more. Although a few surveys of Old Testament scholarship make mention of Miskotte,³⁴ no further translations appeared, and neither did any academic work on Miskotte's legacy—until 1996, when Martin Kessler completed an S.T.M. (Master of Sacred Theology) thesis on Miskotte at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Kessler, a Dutchman by birth, had studied at the Military Academy in Kampen after the Second World War and afterwards emigrated to the United States. He earned an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary and, in 1965, a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from Brandeis University. Although he transferred countries, and, eventually, denominations, moving from the Reformed Church to the Lutheran, Kessler always considered himself a member-at-large of the Amsterdam School of biblical interpretation; he sent articles to the journal *Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese en Bijbelse Theologie*, and he collaborated with Karel Deurloo and Rinse Reeling Brouwer to translate a number of significant materials from this school into English.³⁵ The published version of his dissertation thanks Karel Deurloo for help and encouragement, as well as the American Old Testament scholar and biblical theologian, Christopher Seitz.³⁶

³⁴ Henning Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 57–61; Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 83, 100, 121, 151; David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010 [orig.ed., 1976]), 127–131.

³⁵ Kessler edited and translated the volume *Voices from Amsterdam*. He collaborated with Deurloo on *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), and with Rinse Reeling Brouwer on Frans Breukelman, *The Structure of Sacred Doctrine in Calvin's Theology*, ed. Rinse Reeling Brouwer, trans. Martin Kessler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

³⁶ Martin Kessler, *Battle of the Gods: The God of Israel Versus Marduk of Babylon: A Literary/Theological Interpretation of Jeremiah 50–51*, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum: 2003), 5.

Unusually, then, it was as a published author and a professor (at Waynesboro University and then Clarkson University) that Kessler returned to seminary again in the 1990s to pursue an S.T.M. A class on nineteenth-century atheism with the systematic theologian Eric Crump rekindled Kessler's longstanding interest in Miskotte. Kessler requested that Crump tutor him on Miskotte, particularly in view of Crump's expertise on Rosenzweig, Heidegger, and the German hermeneutic tradition; Kessler's thesis resulted from their study. Crump acted as supervisor for it, and Brooks Schramm, a professor of biblical studies, was a reader. Susquehanna University Press published a revision of this thesis in 1997 under the title, *Kornelis Miskotte: A Biblical Theology*.³⁷

Kessler's book remains until now the sole book-length English treatment of Miskotte's life and theology. It is a short work, only ninety-three pages before its appendices, and divided into six chapters. The first chapter, titled "Miskotte the Man" provides a brief biographical overview of Miskotte, including his youth and education, career struggles, pastoral calls, and wartime dissidence. The second chapter addresses the "sources of his thought," specifically his devotional life, the theology of Karl Barth, and a wide swath of literature. The third chapter surveys Miskotte's writings that reflect on the church's relationship to Judaism: his dissertation, shorter articles, and contributions to a proposed Dutch Reformed confession. Each of the following three chapters summarizes one of Miskotte's major publications: *Edda and Torah*, *When the Gods are Silent*, and *Biblical ABCs*, respectively. Three appendices present Kessler's own translations: of chapter 1 of *Edda and Torah*, chapter 9 of *Biblical ABCs*, and of Miskotte's article on "the election of Israel."

³⁷ Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte*.

Although Kessler hoped that his book might stimulate interest in Miskotte, it seems largely to have failed in that purpose, and indeed, its own debut passed almost without comment.³⁸ Kessler wrote one more article on Miskotte's approach to paganism in 2002.³⁹ In the preface of his published thesis, Kessler notes the "spirited encouragement" of Christopher Seitz for his Miskotte research.⁴⁰ Seitz's own teacher, Brevard S. Childs, apparently helped to inspire Seitz's high regard for Miskotte. Childs, a professor of Old Testament at Yale Divinity School, was one of the most influential biblical theologians of the past half-century. He dedicated his career to outlining a "canonical approach" to scripture: a kind of theological exegesis much indebted to Karl Barth, it envisions the Bible's historical formation process as the product of divine providence. As such, the "final form" is the point of departure for Christian interpretation; the canonical presentation is divinely optimized for ongoing use in worship and instruction.⁴¹ In certain regards, Childs's program parallels that of the Amsterdam School, although little comparison between the two has occurred, at least in English; Peter-Ben Smit's book *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis* presents a partial exception.⁴²

In any case, Childs expressed his high estimation of Miskotte in one place. In the penultimate chapter of his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, Childs addresses

³⁸ There was one review by John Hesselink in *Perspectives* 16 (2001): 21–23.

³⁹ Kessler, "Paganism: A Historical Perspective."

⁴⁰ Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte*, 10.

⁴¹ For a recent overview of Childs's approach, see now Philip Sumpter, *The Substance of Psalm 24: An Attempt to Read Scripture after Brevard S. Childs*, LHBOTS 600 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 7–40. The language of "optimization" in connection with the "final form" comes from Collin Cornell, "Brevard Childs and the Treasures of Darkness," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71 (2018): 33–51, at 35–41.

⁴² Peter-Ben Smit, *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis? A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics*, Studies in Reformed Theology 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2015); also Petr Sláma, *New Theologies of the Old Testament and History: The Function of History in Modern Biblical Scholarship*, trans. Joyce J. Michael, Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel 33 (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2017), 237–242. Cf. also Deurloo, "Biblische Theologie in Grundworten."

“the shape of obedient life,” i.e., ethics. Childs laments the rarity of “find[ing] good models for serious biblical interpretation involving both testaments, which approaches the material for guidance in the shaping of the Christian life.”⁴³ Childs refers to Miskotte as a positive example, given that general state of affairs:

The value of K. H. Miskotte’s provocative book *When the Gods are Silent* is that it at least begins to explore a variety of new vistas for critical theological reflection which is in conversation with Judaism and the New Testament. He not only pursues the topic of Old Testament narrative, Torah, prophecy, and psalmody, but offers exegetical examples of theological reflection. The fact that Miskotte’s book is virtually unknown in the Anglo-American world lies in part from the book’s difficult style, and in part from the unfortunate theological deafness of its readers.⁴⁴

As noted, Childs transmitted his respect for Miskotte to some of his students: Christopher Seitz has continued to represent and develop Childs’s interpretive program over the years, and he has assigned seminar students to read the exegetical sketches on Jonah that conclude *When the Gods are Silent*. Another follower of Childs first introduced me to Miskotte: Philip Sumpter is a British-German Old Testament scholar who wrote a dissertation on Brevard Childs at the University of Bonn.⁴⁵ As early as 2013, he urged me to read Miskotte, and he sent me a (German-language) chapter on Miskotte by Susanne Hennecke, which was subsequently translated into English for inclusion in a volume of essays on appropriations of Karl Barth in various geographical contexts.⁴⁶

⁴³ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 706.

⁴⁴ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 707.

⁴⁵ Sumpter, *The Substance of Psalm 24*.

⁴⁶ Hennecke, “A Theology of Culture in the Mirror of its Barth-reception.”

Despite this early brush with Miskotte, my own interest in his theology did not blossom until the summer of 2017. It was at that time I ran across a conference paper, written in English by Eleonora Hof and posted to her academic website.⁴⁷ Hof had recently earned a doctorate in postcolonial missiology and was then acting as a research fellow at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam; I was still a Ph.D. student in Hebrew Bible at Emory University. Because of political events in the United States during that season, I found myself in search of fresh theological inspiration: on the one hand, I valued Brevard Childs for his christocentrism, inherited from Barth, and his insistence on the canonicity of the Old Testament; this latter emphasis was, after all, my own area of study. But on the other hand, Childs's writings, though instructive, do not communicate a strong critical stance against the conflation of the Gospel with a particular culture. I was looking for a resource that would honor Barth's theological insights but would, like Childs, engage the Old Testament more intensively—and yet which would also, unlike Childs, fund a practice of *resistance*. When I saw the English title of Hof's conference presentation—"Resistance in the Work of K.H. Miskotte"—I was very interested.

I reached out to Eleonora Hof to thank her for this essay, and she and I began a correspondence. Both of us agreed on the contemporaneity of Miskotte's theology, and we also shared a frustration that so little of Miskotte's writings are available in English. Hof soon proposed that we should collaborate to bring one of Miskotte's most popular Dutch-language works into English: namely, his *Bijbels ABC*.⁴⁸ Although this book has been reprinted eight times in Dutch and has been translated into German, Italian, Czech and Latvian, it has never yet

⁴⁷ Eleonora Hof, "Resistance in the Work of K.H. Miskotte," conference presentation for the International Conference of the Protestant Theological University, Groningen, April 24, 2017.

⁴⁸ We tell some of this story in our co-authored, Dutch article: "De vertaling van *Bijbels ABC* naar het Engels," *In de Waagschaal* 49 (2020): 181–184.

received an English translation.⁴⁹ With the support of the Miskotte Foundation, Hof and I successfully submitted a proposal to the American publisher, Fortress Press, which shortly after entered into a publishing agreement with Lexington Books, a division of Rowman & Littlefield. We are now in final stages of completing our translation, and Rinse Reeling Brouwer has written an introduction that ably lays out Miskotte's life and thought for an English-speaking audience.

In 1994, Kessler wrote in the preface of his unpublished S.T.M. thesis: "It is my hope that this modest beginning may in its very modest way be an impetus toward increasing interest in Miskotte and what he stood for. Perhaps for a starter, *Bijbels ABC* should be published in English! Who knows, there may be some with gifts like Breukelman's of Amsterdam, that might be fanned into flame."⁵⁰ Who knows, indeed! But Hof and I share this hope, especially that "what [Miskotte] stood for" would gain traction in the Christian churches: a bold witness to the life-giving power of the divine Name, even in the face of powerful rivals!⁵¹

⁴⁹ For our work of translating, we referred especially to Hinrich Stoevesandt's German version: K.H. Miskotte, *Biblisches ABC: Wider das unbiblische Bibellesen* (Neurkirch-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976).

⁵⁰ Martin Kessler, "Kornelis Heiko Miskotte's Contribution to the Study of the Old Testament: An Introduction," unpublished S.T.M. thesis, 1994.

⁵¹ I thank a number of individuals and institutions for supplying me with information for this article. Eleonora Hof made me aware of the significance of Miskotte's sermon after liberation. Willem van der Meiden shared copies of Miskotte's correspondence with John Mauchline of Glasgow and confirmed Miskotte's references to Shakespeare. Maureen Jennings, Head of Special Collections at Harvard Divinity School, processed the audio reels from the 1966 colloquium and sent me a copy of the "advance program" for that event. Evan Boyd, Library Director and Archivist at United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, loaned me a copy of Martin Kessler's unpublished thesis, and John Hoffmeyer, professor of systematic theology there, connected me with his predecessor, Eric Crump. Lisa Minardi, Executive Director of the Lutheran Archives Center at Philadelphia, and the archive assistant, Courtney Smith, poked around the Doberstein papers for me. Rinse Reeling Brouwer provided some good background on Martin Kessler, and Christopher Seitz answered my questions about assigning Miskotte in seminars. Finally, the article appeared in a Dutch translation by Erica Meijers in *Ophef* ("De Engelstalige receptie van K.H. Miskotte," *Ophef* 22 [2019]: 38–44); I thank the *Ophef* editor, Wilken Veen, for permitting me to publish the English "original" here, and the editor of the

Calvin Theological Journal, Karin Maag, for her careful suggestions for expanding and streamlining.