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Petershans, Sören. *Offenbarung des Namens und versöhntes Leben: Eine Untersuchung zur Gotteslehre bei Kornelis Heiko Miskotte*. Arbeiten zur Systematischen Theologie 11 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 320 pp. \$85.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Collin Cornell

The back cover of Sören Petershans's book indicates that the thinker in question—Dutch theologian Kornelis Heiko Miskotte—remains largely unknown to German-language theology. Germans may dimly recall Miskotte as a mid-century interpreter of Karl Barth and a pioneer of Jewish-Christian dialogue. But beyond that, *nichts!* If such obscurity obtains in German-speaking lands, it runs much deeper in the Anglophone realm.

Petershans thus faces a relatively uncongested theological arena upon which to stage his thesis: that far from being merely a Barth epigone, Miskotte developed his own distinctive theology, and that its individuality is nowhere more evident than its doctrine of God. Hence the title of Petershans's book, which in English reads, *Revelation of the Name and Reconciled Life: A Study on the Doctrine of God according to Kornelis Heiko Miskotte*.

Christian Link and Ulrich Körtner supervised the 2014 University of Vienna dissertation which *Offenbarung des Namens und versöhntes Leben*, in revised form, represents. The first 96 pages of Petershans's study provide a bird's-eye view of Miskotte's theology and an examination of his three greatest theological influences. These remarks prepare for the longer, more focused, and more innovative second part of Petershans's book.

Kornelis Heiko Miskotte (1894-1976) was born in Utrecht and studied theology at Utrecht University. After graduating, he pastored for twenty years in both rural and urban settings, completing a dissertation at the University of Groningen while serving as a full-time pastor. His first theological mentor was Johannes Hermanus Gunning, Jr., a founder of the Dutch "Ethical Theology." The central concept of this theological school was encounter with God. Divine revelation imparted a way of life and not doctrinal content; truth was a matter of ethics and not objective and rational. Miskotte would later call this approach "ethical mysticism." Above all it sought a synthesis of faith and culture. Although Miskotte would later dissent sharply from this synthesis, his mature doctrine of God nonetheless inherits much from this theological school. Miskotte's emphasis on experience, even experience of God, and his sense of apostolic solidarity with culture and the world alike trace back to Gunning's influence.

In 1923, while serving in his first pastoral call, Miskotte read Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*. His initial journal entry on it deems Barth's style expressionist and his thought Marcionite. However, Barth won him over after only a few days. Miskotte began a correspondence with Barth—and a theological friendship—that would last until Barth's death in 1968. Barth would in 1956 address Miskotte as "the seer and poet among my friends." Miskotte considered himself a disciple. He wrote several books on Barth, including two on the *Church Dogmatics* alone, and he became the best-known proponent of Barth's theology to the Netherlands. Barth's influence saturates

Miskotte's theology; Miskotte's understanding of divine revelation is deeply indebted to it. Like Barth and other dialectical theologians, Miskotte renounced any synthesis of God and culture. Instead he upheld the particularity and event-character of God's self-disclosure. Miskotte also shared Barth's Christological concentration (as it has been called) and his attentiveness to the theological locus of predestination. For him as for Barth, Jesus Christ is the singular and exclusive Word of God, and God's initiative towards humanity in Christ coincides with God's own self-determination from eternity.

The last of Miskotte's three major influences is the Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, whose *Star of Redemption* Miskotte read in 1928, and about whom he wrote much of his Groningen dissertation. In common with many Christian dialectical theologians, Rosenzweig's work centers on divine revelation as an event. In distinction from other dialectical theologians, Rosenzweig envisions the proper name of God—the Tetragrammaton—as the event of revelation. Miskotte wholly absorbed this conviction. Rosenzweig also taught Miskotte to prize the Old Testament as a self-standing theological witness. Indeed, for Miskotte the Old Testament already contains “all truth,” and it preaches God's becoming-flesh (*Gottes Fleischwerdung*). The unique property of the New Testament is only to name this becoming-flesh as Jesus Christ—and so to foreground divine love. Rosenzweig also confirmed for Miskotte the *experiential* nature of encounter with God.

The second part of Petershans's book divides into three sections. The first draws on analytic philosophy of language to streamline and sophisticate Miskotte's view of the divine name. Here Petershans differentiates between proper names and appellatives (*Benennungsnamen*). God appointed one proper name to the divine self—YHWH. As a proper name, YHWH refers fixedly to one unsubstitutable individual, even as that individual's other attributes and forms of address vary. In this way, Petershans layers a more technical vocabulary onto Miskotte's own comments that the divine name is “a nameless name”—truly empty of content and solely referential—while attracting other names and qualities.

The second and third sections present the heart of Petershans's book. Petershans engages in close exegesis of Miskotte's writings, primarily his 1956 book, *When the Gods are Silent* (English translation, Harper 1967) and his primer in Bible reading, *Biblical ABCs*, written under Nazi occupation in 1941 and still untranslated into English. These sections also demonstrate Petershans's thesis that Miskotte's doctrine of God is distinct relative to Barth. The second section, entitled “Revelation as Revelation of the Name according to Miskotte,” accesses Miskotte's concept of revelation through his teaching about predestination. Petershans organizes much of his discussion on the basis of a schema he derives from section headings in Miskotte's *Biblical ABCs*:

Name = Revelation  
Name = YHWH  
Name = Jesus Christ

Miskotte identifies the divine name YHWH as the event of divine self-revelation. But he also understands revelation most basically as *sanctification* (*Heiligung*), that is, as effecting *Lebensänderung*—“life change.” For Miskotte, divine revelation as such transforms the

participating human subject. This is seen in Miskotte's treatment of the paradigmatic burning bush narrative (Exodus 3), where God's communication of a name is at the same time a divine self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*) to liberate Israel from Egypt—a *Lebensänderung* of some magnitude. Miskotte calls this event an *Urtat*—a primordial act of divine self-demarcation; Petershans glosses it as “predestination.” In the schema above and throughout his writings, Miskotte also equates this event with the Bible's other proper name: Jesus Christ. Miskotte thus speaks of “one covenant,” “one salvation,” and “oneness of the times,” in that both testaments of the Christian Bible by a “double reference” witness to a single divine self-determination to save. Together but distinctly they testify to a single divine predestination of the divine self for *assumptio carnis*—“assumption of flesh.” In this way, Miskotte makes revelation of the name and reconciled life to coincide, as in Petershans's main title.

Miskotte views the two testaments as united in their witness to God's becoming-flesh, but he also differentiates them, and that difference silhouettes his individuality relative to Barth. The difference—or “surplus,” as Miskotte calls it—of the New Testament vis-à-vis the Old is its clarity in presenting this “one salvation” as *justification*. The surplus of the Old is its clarity in presenting salvation in its aspect as *sanctification*. The Old Testament, in other words, articulates the revelation of the divine name within a rich and concrete variety of human experiences—erotic and political, economic and ethical—while the New Testament does not. Because he prioritizes the Old Testament, the human and participatory “side” of revelation is thereby given prominence in Miskotte's theology. In just this regard, Petershans argues, Miskotte distinguishes his doctrine of God from Barth's. Barth focuses on revelation as justification, and so seals his theological system off from human experience; Miskotte focuses on revelation as sanctification, maintaining a greater openness to human experience and culture. To be sure, as Petershans observes at length, the two theologians differ in their Trinitarian doctrine: Miskotte hardly speaks of the Trinity while Barth is famous for recovering it. But Petershans locates the more fundamental divide in Miskotte's view of divine self-revelation as sanctification.

*Offenbarung des Namens und versöhntes Leben* brings welcome attention to an interesting and underappreciated theologian in the dialectical trajectory. For that alone Petershans's book renders a valuable service to the theological academy. Petershans also deserves thanks for giving a relatively clear overview of a theologian whose thick prose and meandering presentation one early reviewer described as “stygian” (James Brown, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1969). Also valuable is Petershans's engagement with other authors who have written about Miskotte, particularly since most of them write in Dutch. Petershans's frequent translations from Dutch to German in footnotes, for example, are helpful. However, not all the sections of his book are equally successful. Petershans is at his best when he exposit Miskotte—and not when he makes long summaries of secondary literature on analytic philosophy or theologies of revelation. His book will be of interest to Barth scholarship as an example of free-thinking and constructive Barthianism.

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