

Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology

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Introduction

We were created to worship the living God. According to Jesus, the Father seeks such worship (John 4:23). There is no higher calling. Indeed, it is a firm biblical principle that we become in character like the object of our worship. However, in a fallen world, this calling can be distorted. The key is the nature of the God or gods we adore. If we worship the living God of biblical revelation then we will image him. If we worship idols we will image them: “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Ps 115:8). A. W. Tozer wrote in his work on the attributes of God,

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.... The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.¹

Tozer saw the importance of a right characterization of God and he knew also that the Scriptures are the key, because the Scriptures are nothing less than God’s self-revelation.

To use John Calvin’s classic image, the Scriptures are like glasses that bring God into focus. Calvin argued,

Just as old or bleary eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips. Not only does he teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows himself as the God upon whom they are to look.²

In Old Testament times, that coming into focus in general terms is nowhere more evident than in the theophany on Sinai as described in the book of Exodus. In particular, it is Exodus 34, which especially brings the living God into sharper relief—albeit not in such a way as to leave mystery behind.³ After all, Moses will only be able to see God’s back. The face of God must not be seen (Exod 33:23).

Judaism has long recognized Exodus 34—in particular the revelation of the divine name in Exod 34:6-7 and its presentation of the so called “Thirteen Attributes”—as the nearest thing to a systematic statement of the being and attributes of God in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ According to Benno Jacob, “They have

been a leitmotif of the Jewish penitential prayers since that time and form the foundation of the countless *s'li-hot* composed through centuries. The repentant people of Israel have used these thoughts to plead to HIM with complete contrition, ardor, and zeal.⁵ How exactly thirteen attributes or *middôth* (“measures”) are derived convincingly from Exod 34:6-7 requires quite a feat of exegetical imagination.⁶

A great theologian of the Reformation period who recognized the importance of the *middôth* was John Calvin. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he argues that “the attributes of God according to Scripture agree with those known in his creatures”—in other words, communicable attributes—and chooses Exod 34:6-7 to do so. He writes,

Indeed, in certain passages clearer descriptions are set forth for us, wherein his true appearance is exhibited, to be seen as in an image. For when Moses described the image, he obviously meant to tell briefly whatever was right for men to know about him. “Jehovah,” he says, “Jehovah, a merciful and gracious God, patient and of much compassion, and true, who keepest mercy for thousands, who takest away iniquity and transgression ... in whose presence the innocent will not be innocent, who visitest the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children.” Here let us observe that his eternity and his self-existence are announced by that wonderful name twice repeated. Thereupon his powers are mentioned, by which he is shown to us not as he is in himself, but as he is toward us: so that this recognition of him consists more in living experience than in vain and highflown speculation. Now we hear the same powers enumerated there that we have noted as shining in heaven and earth: kindness, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth. For power and might are contained under the title *Elohim*.⁷

Paul Helm rightly maintains, “Calvin’s comments in the *Institutes* on this passage constitute a fundamental locus of his exposition of the divine nature.”⁸

My brief then is to explore a pivotal part of the theophany on Sinai—namely, Exod 34:6-7—and its implications for constructing an evangelical doctrine of God.⁹ To do so, I will first examine what it is to develop our doctrine of God evangelically; next, consider Exod 34:5-8 in particular in context; then relate the passage to the discussions of the doctrine of God in some standard evangelical systematic theologies (Erickson and Grudem) and to the discipline of Biblical Theology.¹⁰ Penultimate, I will argue for the importance of the discipline of Biblical Theology and finally offer a summation.

One final introductory note: for the purposes of this exploration from this point on I will use the term *middôth* to refer to the set of descriptors of God found in Exod 34:6-7.

Developing The Doctrine of God Evangelically

In my first year of theological college, I remember meeting an evangelical friend who was studying at another place. To be ordained in his denomination he had no choice but to do so. His seminary was liberal, mine evangelical. He lamented that he had just completed a semester course on the doctrine of God. The Bible was not opened once, but Paul Tillich’s first volume of systematic theology was opened constantly. His experience contrasted starkly with my own. In my college, Scripture was foundational and normative.

For the evangelical, his or her doctrine of Scripture flows out of submission to the lordship of Christ. Christology and bibli-

ology are inextricably linked. How can the disciple have a different view of Scripture to that of the Master? Jesus' own view of Scripture is clearly portrayed in his debate with the Sadducees over the resurrection (Matt 22:23-33). They tested him with a conundrum about a woman who lost husband after husband. Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Jesus' response is definitive. The Sadducees had erred formally and materially. Formally, they were showing their ignorance of Scripture in doing theology, and, materially, there was a specific Scripture in the canon they embraced that undermined the premise of their argument. They denied the resurrection, but the text from Exod 3:6 which Jesus quotes—"I am (*egō eimi*) the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—presupposes life after death in relation to God (Matt 22:32). Jesus argues from this text that "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt 22:32). Instructively, in contrast to the pluralism of our day, the Jesus of the canonical Gospels thought that there could be truth or error in theology.

If the incarnate Master lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, so too ought the disciple. Consequently an evangelical way of doing theology is predicated upon a high view of Scripture. By "evangelical" in this context I mean, therefore, the epistemic claim that the doctrine of God ought to be based on this high view of the Scriptures as the infallible (will not mislead) and inerrant (teaches no error) Word of God—albeit in human words (more anon.).¹¹ And, with this claim, there is a further one that Scripture as special revelation is normative for Christian belief, values, and practices. Scripture constitutes the norm of norms (*norma normans*). Other norms

do operate in doing theology—tradition, reason, and experience—but they are subservient to Scripture as normed norms (*norma normata*). This is the heart of the Reformers' view of *sola Scriptura*—not that Scripture is the only norm operating, but in any clash between authorities Scripture is the final court of appeal.¹² If a doctrine is in any way textless it ought to be unconvincing.

What, then, does Exodus 34 have to say to us normatively about God?

God Proclaims His Name: Exodus 34:5-8

Let's begin with the background to the passage. By the time the reader reaches Exodus 34 much has already been encountered in the narrative. God has heard the cries of his oppressed people and rescued them from Pharaoh through his covenant agent Moses (Exodus 1-15). His grumbling people have made their way to Sinai. On the way the Lord has met their survival needs. He has provided water, manna, and quail (Exodus 15-17). Moreover, the Lord has gone victoriously to war again for them against the Amelakites (Exodus 17). Jethro's visit has led to a redistribution of Moses's workload as judge (Exodus 18). At Sinai the people have been awed by the dramatic theophany (Exodus 19). The Ten Commandments have been announced to Israel (Exodus 20). After the revelation of this apodictic law has come that of casuistic law (Exodus 21-23). The covenant has been confirmed (Exodus 24). Moses has gone up the mountain into the cloud forty days and nights during which time the details of the tabernacle have been revealed to him (Exodus 25-31). However, during this time Israel has become impatient with Moses' absence. They have prevailed upon Aaron to provide tangible

gods to worship, and so, while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Torah on the tablets of stone from God, Israel below was making and worshipping an idol (Exodus 32). R. W. L. Moberly comments, "Israel's impatient making of the golden calf is presented as, in effect, a breaking of the first of the two commandments, and while Israel is still at the mountain of God; it is rather like committing adultery on one's wedding night."¹³ Angered by their folly, the Lord has declared that he would start afresh with only Moses and his family. But Moses has interceded on Israel's behalf with considerable *chutzpah*. The Lord then has judged rebellious Israel with a plague (Exodus 32). However, he also has answered Moses' plea that he persevere with Israel (Exodus 32).

Just before our key passage, we find in Exodus 33 that Moses has met with God outside the camp in the tent of meeting. The Lord had in effect withdrawn his presence from his people and declared that he would not go with Israel to the land flowing with milk and honey. Moses, again with considerable *chutzpah*, has reminded YHWH that Israel is his people. The Lord has promised that his presence would go with them (Exod 33:17), but only after Moses has argued for it (Exod 33:15-16). At first the Lord promised only to go with Moses and give Moses rest (Exod 33:14).

Moses has wanted to know more deeply the God who had first revealed his name to him at the burning bush (cf. Exodus 3 and 33:13). YHWH identified himself there as "I am Who I am" or "I will be what I will be" (Exod 3:14). According to Brevard Childs, God is saying that the subsequent events of history will pour content into the name. He maintains, "The content of his name

is filled by what he does (Ex. 3:14), and Israel experiences God's identity through revelation and not by clever discovery."¹⁴ Now having journeyed to Sinai, Moses wanted to know more. As Maimonides suggests, "The phrasing 'Shew me now thy ways and I shall know thee' indicates that God is known by His attributes: if one knows the WAYS one knows Him."¹⁵ Moses has asked the Lord to show him his glory (Exod 33:18). The divine response is instructive,

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Exod 33:19-20).¹⁶

Moses wanted glory. He wanted to see the majesty of God. Instead God gave him goodness.¹⁷ God's glory lies in his goodness, not his might, and that goodness is seen expressed in sovereign grace and mercy.

We now turn to our key passage.¹⁸ At divine behest, Moses chisels out two stone tablets. YHWH will write afresh the Ten Commandments on them once Moses returns to the top of the mountain. What happens next is one of the singular revelatory moments in the canonical presentation.

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod 34:5-7).

The only appropriate response to such a revelation of the divine nature is the one Moses adopts: “And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped” (Exod 34:8). This is the protocol one adopts in the presence of overwhelming greatness, indeed goodness.

Significantly Moses does more than simply acknowledge the Lord in worship. He is quick to turn the self-revelation of God into the platform for prayer to God. He wants further reassurance that the Lord will truly go with Israel. Prayer is no leap in the dark but a response to the God who has declared what he is truly like. Israel has sinned and had proven to be a stiff-necked people (Exod 33:3). And without the divine presence, Israel is at risk as it journeys to the land of promise. The Lord had just declared himself to be a gracious and forgiving God, and so Moses prays: “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance” (Exod 34:9). Moses in effect, echoes the *middôth* at numerous points in idea and language: “favor,” “pardon,” “iniquity,” and “sin.” This is a feature of the biblical practice of prayer. What God reveals about his might and character, whether in words, or by deeds of creation, or deeds of redemption are turned into the grounds for praise or petition by the supplicant.

The divine name has been proclaimed. Moses has responded fittingly, as he should. The question remains, however, as to precisely what YHWH has declared about his own nature. A brief adumbration will need to suffice:

- The Lord is merciful (“compassionate,” NIV). Pierre Berthoud offers this nuanced comment: “The term *rahûm* lays the empha-

sis on God’s deep appreciation and understanding of the misery and suffering of the creation including man.”¹⁹ For example, YHWH accedes to Moses’ plea (Exod 32:12b-14).

- The Lord is gracious (*hannûn*). For example, earlier in the Torah his graciousness is exhibited in the gift of family and prosperity that he gave to Jacob (Gen 33:5, 11).
- The Lord is slow to anger. He is patient towards even the grumbling. Laney captures the idea well: “It is as if He takes a long deep breath as He deals with sin and holds His anger in abeyance.”²⁰ For example, the divine patience with Israel on its grumbling way to Sinai (Exod 15:22-17:7)
- The Lord abounds in steadfast love (*hêsed*) and faithfulness (*emet*). His love is persistent because it is grounded in his covenant loyalty. It is no passing fancy. The Lord also abounds in faithfulness. His Word is to be relied upon. For example, he honors his promise to Abraham and remembers—that is to say, acts on—his covenant obligations (Exod 2:23-25; 32:12b-14).²¹
- The Lord is forgiving. He is prepared to forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin. This cluster, which appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, covers the three core sins of humanity outside of Eden (e.g., see Ps 51:1-2; Dan 9:24).²²
- The Lord by no means clears the guilty. God’s forgiving character is not to be presumed upon.²³ Unrepentant sin will not go unpunished. Walter Kaiser comments, “But his grace is balanced, for ‘he does not leave the guilty unpunished.’ The other side of our merciful and loving God is his justice and righteousness. Woe to them who reject God’s grace!”²⁴
- The Lord visits the iniquity of one generation on the next. Sin has consequences. To go against the moral grain of the universe has repercussions. As Wayne

Grudem suggests in his note on the passage, "This statement shows the horrible nature of sin in the way it has effects far beyond the individual sinner, also harming those around the sinner and harming future generations as well."²⁵ For example, think of the troubles in David's house after his sin with Bathsheba, which included the death of the baby and arguably a factor in Ahithophel's revolt against David. Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather and the baby's great-grandfather (cf. 2 Sam 12:14-18 and 2 Sam 16-17).

Exodus 34:6-7 and Systematic Theology

Both Millard J. Erickson's *Christian Theology* and Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* are widely used texts by evangelicals and rightly so.²⁶ How do these respected theologians discuss the doctrine of God and what role, if any, do the *middôth* of Exod 34:6-7 play in their presentations?

Erickson devotes part three of his work to the topic of "What God Is Like."²⁷ In this part he canvases the attributes of God. He makes the excellent point from the start that "[t]he doctrine of God is the central point of the rest of theology. One's view of God might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which one's theology is constructed and life is lived."²⁸ He offers a modification—at least in terminology—of one of the traditional ways of dividing the attributes of God. Instead of discussing the natural and moral attributes of God he delineates the "attributes of greatness" and the "attributes of goodness."

First, Erickson discusses the attributes of greatness (akin to God's natural attributes). These include spirituality, personality, life, infinity and constancy.²⁹ The last of these is somewhat question begging

since Erickson argues that constancy shows itself in these terms: "Thus, God is ever faithful to his covenant with Abraham, for example." And again, "What we are dealing with here [in this section] is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised."³⁰ This sounds more like a moral attribute than a natural one. Immutability would have been a better descriptor.

Next, Erickson in a separate chapter deals with the attributes of goodness (akin to God's moral attributes). These include moral purity, integrity and love.³¹ A subset of God's love is God's grace. In this part of the discussion is one of his two references to Exodus 34 in the entire work.³² It figures in a comparison with Paul's claim in Eph 1:5-8 concerning God's grace. Both Exod 34:6 and Eph 1:5-8 speak of the grace of God. Therefore, that ancient heretic Marcion, for example, was wrong to pitch one testament against the other. On the very next page, in discussing God's persistence, Erickson again refers to Exod 34:6, as a reference to the divine love: God is slow to anger.³³ The *middôth* per se are not in view.

Like Erickson, in his discussion of the doctrine of God, Grudem divides the attributes of God into two classes. He rightly observes, "When we come to talk about the character of God, we realize that we cannot say everything the Bible teaches us about God's character at once. We need some way to decide which aspect of God's character to discuss first, which aspect to discuss second, and so forth."³⁴ Unlike Erickson, Grudem works with the widely accepted dichotomy of incommunicable and communicable attributes.

Grudem first deals with the incommunicable attributes. These are attributes

that indicate how God is different from us. These include independence, unchangeableness, eternity, omnipresence, and unity.³⁵ There is one curious feature of his discussion. He argues, “Not one of the incommunicable attributes of God is completely without some likeness in the character of human beings.”³⁶ Independence (aseity), however, is surely an attribute that is uniquely God’s own by definition. God’s existence depends on nothing outside of God. Thus, for example, the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is an act of generosity not necessity.

In two further chapters, Grudem expounds the communicable attributes of God. These indicate how God is like us in his being, in mental and moral attributes, in will and excellence. They include attributes describing God’s being (spirituality and invisibility), mental attributes (knowledge, wisdom, and truthfulness), moral attributes (goodness, love, mercy, holiness, peace, righteousness, jealousy, and wrath), attributes of purpose (will, freedom, and omnipotence), and summary attributes (perfection, blessedness, beauty, and glory).³⁷ In chapter 12 Grudem has his only reference to the *middôth* of Exod 34:6-7: the Scripture memory passage.³⁸ Otherwise the *middôth* per se plays no role in his doctrine of God.

Exodus 34:6-7 and Biblical Theology

In the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Brian S. Rosner’s provides a first rate definition of Biblical Theology:

To sum up, biblical theology may be defined as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible’s teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight

of the Bible’s overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.³⁹

In the light of Rosner’s definition, how is Exod 34:6-7 to be placed in “the Bible’s overarching narrative”?

Canonically speaking, our passage is located within the framework of the promise to Abraham and the covenant that God made with the patriarch (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-21). It is on the basis of this covenant that God acts to rescue Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exod 2:23-24). Furthermore, he identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Exod 3:6). The Mosaic covenant in fact nestles within the more fundamental Abrahamic one. The Abrahamic covenant is unconditional, whereas the Mosaic one is conditional. The Abrahamic covenant is royal grant-like, whereas the Mosaic one is suzerainty treaty like.⁴⁰

With regard to Exod 34:6-7, each of the *middôth* either has an earlier Old Testament story behind it—either found in Genesis or Exodus—or is illustrated by a later Old Testament story or passage.⁴¹ Laney expresses the point admirably:

The importance of Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundation for biblical theology is evidenced by the fact that this statement is repeated many times in the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 103:8, 17; 145:8; Jer. 32:18-19; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2). Echoes of this self-revelation also appear in Deuteronomy 5:9-10; 1 Kings 3:6; Lamentations 3:32; Daniel 9:4; and Nahum 1:3. The biblical writers clearly regarded Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundational statement about God.⁴²

He also rightly observes, “Strangely, this great passage has received little attention from systematic theologians and I might add and neither has the way

it ramifies through the rest of the Old Testament canon."⁴³

Space limitations forbid an extended examination of each of the anticipations or repetitions of the *middôth* or its echoes. However, one later canonical restatement of the *middôth* will usefully serve as a more extended case in point: namely, the book of Jonah. Jonah is particularly interesting because, like Joel, there is an important addition to the list.

Whenever I lecture on the doctrine of God and refer to Jonah's knowledge of the *middôth*, I ask the class how many of them have heard a sermon on the book that explains Jonah's flight to Tarshish as motivated by fear of the Ninevites. Typically a goodly number have. The application is about our need to heed the call of God and not be afraid of the opposition. But exegesis shows that the meaning lies elsewhere. Jonah's problem was that he knew all too well the revealed character of God. He knew the *middôth* as the following passage shows:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jonah 3:10-4:4, emphasis added).

The echoes of the *middôth* are plain: "gracious," "merciful," "slow to anger," and "abounding in steadfast love." The interesting addition is "and relenting of disaster."

Has Jonah, as a prophet much later than Moses, expanded the list in the light of God's dealings with Israel post Sinai? Joel likewise extends the list (Joel 2:13).⁴⁴

Thus far we have explored how Exod 34:6-7 informs the Old Testament. However, the exploration cannot end there. As Rosner avers, Biblical Theology has a "Christocentric focus." And so to the luminous figure of Christ we must turn. By "the luminous figure of Christ" I don't mean as critically reconstructed or deconstructed by a certain kind of scholarship, but to the Christ as canonically presented or to the "Jesus of Testimony" to use Richard Bauckham's helpful phrase, and to "the theophanic character of the history of Jesus."⁴⁵

The Gospel of John reveals that in the new era theophany gives way to Christophany. The God who cannot be seen is definitively "exegeted" by the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ, the Son (cf. John 1:18; 5:37; and 14:5-9). But Christophany does not leave the *middôth* behind, but rather embodies them. The Prologue of John is a good example. As Andreas J. Köstenberger correctly contends, "The reference in 1:14 to Jesus taking up residence among God's people resulting in the revelation of God's glory ... also harks back to OT references to the manifestation of the presence and glory (*kābōd*) of God, be it theophanies, the tabernacles, or the temple."⁴⁶ The first OT Scripture he cites is from the Sinai theophany Exod 33:22, namely, Moses request to see YHWH's glory. And he surely is right to argue that John 1:14 and 17 which speak of Jesus as "full of grace and truth" "in all probability harks back to the phrase 'loving-kindness [*hesed*] and truth [*ēmet*]' in Exod. 34:6."⁴⁷ Again Köstenberger is our guide: "In its original context this joint expression

refers to God's covenant faithfulness to His people Israel. John's message found ultimate expression in the sending of God's one-of-a-kind Son (1:14,18)."⁴⁸

Why Systematic Theology Needs Biblical Theology

As we have seen in the presentations both of Erickson and Grudem, the *middôth* per se do not figure and yet as we have seen, the *middôth* is integral to the canonical portrayal of God's character (*hashem*) both Old Testament and New. How, then, would Biblical Theology be of help to the systematic theologian? As previously argued, methodologically, a biblical theology predicated on a high view of Scripture works with the entire canon (*tota Scriptura*) by placing texts in their contexts in their literary units in their books in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history. Thus, Biblical Theology is methodologically prior to Systematic Theology. It helps the systematician both avoid simplistic proof texting (*dicta probantia*) and remain sensitive to the narrative drive of Scripture.

To be fair, the structures of most systematic theologies do preserve the overarching narrative of Scripture, as do the classic creeds (Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian). Like Scripture and like the creeds, they move from the Maker of Heaven and Earth to the world to come. However, that narrative structure can be hard to detect because of the need for systematic theologies rightly to interact with discussions of the past (e.g., Augustine versus Pelagius on sin) and issues of the present (e.g., the claim by some feminist theologians that the cross represents divine child abuse) and by discussing prolegomena matters (e.g., sources for theology, theological method, and so forth).

Most importantly Biblical Theology can help the systematician in articulating the doctrine of God in such a way as to get the biblical accents right. In this way, Geerhardus Vos's observation gets some real purchase: "Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish."⁴⁹ For example, you would never know, from reading whether Erickson, Grudem, or others, how important the *middôth* are for knowing God as God has chosen to make his nature known. The revelation of the name (*hashem*) of course is more than the offering of a convenient designation. Rather in the canon the divine name refers to the very nature of God. As Charles H. H. Scobie argues, "God's name is an expression of his essential nature."⁵⁰ The God of biblical revelation wants to proclaim his moral attributes in the first instance. Erickson is on sound ground to work with this category. However, like Grudem, he places the moral attributes—in Grudem's case the communicable attributes—second in presentation: goodness comes after greatness. Not so on Sinai. The revelation of the divine graciousness and mercy on Sinai is of a piece with the Genesis account where blessing is first, cursing is second (cf. Gen 2:3; 3:14-19), and, as we saw in John's Prologue, with the incarnation, grace comes through Jesus Christ (John 1:14-17). Moreover, in this same Gospel we see that Christ came, in the first instance, not to condemn the world but to save it, even though he is the eschatological judge, and those who remain in darkness will ultimately be held accountable (cf. John 3:17; 12:47; 5:24-27).

However, it is not only a matter of rightly ordering the systematic discussion. There is the question of weighting the discussion. Perhaps a theological

primer like I. H. Marshall's *Pocket Guide To Christian Beliefs* shows a suggestive way forward—albeit undeveloped, since only a primer. His chapter on the nature of God provides an example. When discussing God as Trinity he cites a large passage of Scripture, rather than a single verse (Eph 1:3-14).⁵¹ Strangely, though, the Ephesians passage plays no real role in what follows. What would a systematic theology look like that worked not with individual proof texts only but with the great landmark passages of Scripture like Exodus 34 that are integral to the way God has elected to self reveal? On this approach, for example, the discussion of the incarnation might be anchored in a lengthy discussion of John 1:1-18, carefully understood as a prologue to the theology of John as a whole and then considered in the sweep of the canon with a sensitivity to the fact that such a passage does not belong to former times when God spoke to the forefathers by the prophets but in these last days when he has spoken through his Son as Hebrews makes plain (Heb 1:1-2). Such a method better exhibits the analogy of Scripture (*analogia scripturae* or in some traditions *analogia fidei*), whereby Scripture is compared with Scripture, Scripture interprets Scripture, and plain Scripture interprets more obscure or difficult portions of Scripture. The classic alternative would simply use brackets with Scriptural proof texts (*dicta probantia*) listed in them to buttress the points being made. For example, in the incarnation, the Second Person of the Godhead assumed human nature without abandoning deity (John 1:14 and so forth). The traditional proof texting method needs to be complemented by a Biblical Theology that provides the landmark biblical passages as well. Karl Barth is methodologically helpful on this point,

despite an inadequate bibliography. His unfinished *Church Dogmatics* contains not only 15,000 biblical references but around 2,000 small print exegetical discourses as well.⁵² Herbert Hartwell comments, “[I]n Barth’s view . . . the task of theology is the expository presentation of that revelation on the basis of a theological exegesis of the content of the Bible.”⁵³

Richard Lints is an evangelical theologian who is sensitive to the need for Biblical Theology to shape a systematic theology. In his *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomena to Evangelical Theology*, he devotes much of the last part of the work to the subject.⁵⁴ In this part he considers the theological nature of the Bible, the move from the biblical text to a theological framework, and the move from that framework to a theological vision. He rightly argues that “The dominant themes of the biblical text ought to be the dominant themes of the theological framework” and that “the simple insight that the Scriptures have a ‘story-like’ character will be important.”⁵⁵ In fact, the premise he adopts for the book is “that systematic theology must be structurally dependent on biblical theology and hence would need to undergo a major change from its traditional categories of presentation.”⁵⁶

Conclusion

The *middôth* of Exodus 34 are integral to the knowledge of God and not incidental to the canonical plotline. This is who God is, which his prior and subsequent acts illustrate, and which Biblical Theology as a method displays. Doing is predicated on being. This is his name proclaimed. We saw how it is echoed in every part of the Hebrew Bible and has its instantiation in Jesus himself. It is the basis for biblical prayer. It explains why God spared repen-

tant Ninevah much to Jonah's disappointment. In contradistinction, we also saw that two standard evangelical systematic theologies—those of Erickson and Grudem—present the nature of God in such a way as to make the *middôth* incidental. This lack of due emphasis raises acutely the question of how systematic theology ought to use Scripture to construct a doctrine of God. In doing theology, alongside the classic proof texting method—which is still needed for brevity's sake—a place at the table needs to be given to a way of reading Scripture that locates a text in its context in its literary unit in its book in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history. This way of reading Scripture is at the heart of Biblical Theology as a discipline. As Richard Lints suggests, "Biblical theology and systematic theology are mutually enriching, they do not compete."⁵⁷ I would only add "and exegesis must lie at the heart of both."

ENDNOTES

¹A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (London: James Clarke, 1965), 9.

²John Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion (The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection)*, Rio, WI: Ages Software, 2002), 1:6:1 (CD-Rom version).

³Geerhardus Vos, (*Redemptive History And Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* [ed. Richard Gaffin Jr.; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2001], 431) describes Exod 34:6-7 as one of "four classic statements, where the Torah rises to the height of a description of the character of God." The others he cites are Exod 20:5-6; Num 14:8; and Deut 7:9-10.

⁴For example, see Moses Maimonides, *The Guide Of the Perplexed* (trans. Chaim Rabin; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 71-77. Maimonides's dates are

1135-1204. For a contemporary Jewish view see Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Exodus," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 189.

⁵Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (trans. Walter Jacob in association with Yaakov Elman; Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV, 1992), 985 (emphasis in original).

⁶See, for example, "Selichot – Brief Explanation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" ([accessed 3 March 2008]. Online: <http://www.ou.org/chagim/elul/selichotattrib.htm>), which maintains that the first mention of the Name (Yahweh) is the attribute of mercy shown before a person sins, whilst the second mention of the Name (*hashem*) refers to another attribute of mercy, one shown to the sinner after sin.

⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:10:2. Paul Helm drew my attention to Calvin on this point in his slightly revised John Murray Lecture delivered at the Highland Theological College, entitled "John Calvin—What's the Big Idea?" [accessed 28 April 2008]. Online: <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com>.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Brevard S. Childs comments, "[T]he God of the Old Testament has a name by which he lets himself be known. The decisive passage is Ex. 34:5-6" (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 354).

¹⁰As a convention I will adopt Biblical Theology with capitals for the discipline, that is a particular reading strategy for engaging Scripture. Many refer to any way of doing theology that is grounded in a high view of Scripture as biblical theology. To avoid possible confusion, if I refer to any of the latter I will use

lower case.

¹¹I am aware that there are evangelicals who do not affirm a view of Scripture as high as this and that conservative representatives of other traditions would likewise embrace Scripture as the Word of God—albeit with a longer canon (e.g., Roman Catholic and Orthodox).

¹²See my “Thinking Theologically,” *Reformed Theological Review* 48, no. 2 (1989); and my “*Sola Scriptura*: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Churchman* 104, no. 1 (1990).

¹³R. W. L. Moberly, “Exodus, Book of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 214. Moberly also draws interesting parallels between Exodus 32-34 and Genesis 6-9, especially between the figures of faithful Noah and faithful Moses (215).

¹⁴Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 355.

¹⁵Maimonides, *The Guide*, 72 (emphasis in original). This verse (Exod 33:13) contains an important epistemic principle. To know a person one needs to be exposed to their ways: that is to say, the characteristic behaviors of a person. This usually takes some time or exposure to stories that narrate those behaviors. It is not enough merely to know that God exists. One needs to know the moral disposition of the God who exists. Herein lies the genius of the “storied” nature of biblical revelation. See my article “God, Doctrine of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 259-263.

¹⁶All biblical quotations are from

the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise stated.

¹⁷J. Carl Laney has misread John I. Durham on this point. Laney maintains, “Durham suggests that ‘goodness (טוב) here may imply the “beauty” of the Lord and so it anticipated a theophany” (“God’s Self-Revelation In Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 [2001]: 39-40).

However, Durham is expounding someone else’s view which he goes on to critique: “[W]hat he gives to Moses is quite specifically *not* the sight of his beauty, his glory, his Presence—that, indeed, he pointedly denies. What he gives rather is a *description*, and at that, a description not of how he *looks* but how he *is*” (J. I. Durham, *Exodus* [Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word: Dallas, 2002], CD-Rom version [emphases in original]).

¹⁸For an illuminating study of the passage see R. W. L. Moberly, *At The Mountain Of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983).

¹⁹Pierre Berhoud, “The Compassion of God: Exodus 34:5-9 in the light of Exodus 32-34,” in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 163.

²⁰Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation In Exodus 34:6-8,” 46.

²¹Divine remembering is not referring to a divine memory lapse but is idiomatic for God acting. He remembered Noah, he remembered Israel, and Jesus promises to remember the thief on the cross (cf. Gen 8:1; Exod 2:24; and Luke 23:42).

²²With regard to the multiplicity of terms, at least fifty, denoting “sin” in the Old Testament, Henri Blocher describes transgression, sin, and iniquity as “[t]hree of the most important” (“Sin,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 782).

²³This point is well made by R. W. L. Moberly, “How May We Speak Of God? A Reconsideration Of The Nature Of Biblical Theology,” *Tyn-dale Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (2002): 200.

²⁴Walter Kaiser Jr., “Exodus,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

²⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 209.

²⁶The tone of my comments on Erickson and Grudem ought not to be exaggerated. Both works are immensely useful, and I recommend both to my own students.

²⁷Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), chapters 12 and 13 are the relevant ones. This is the unabridged, one volume edition.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 263.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 267-81.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 278-79.

³¹In discussing God’s integrity, Erickson has a subsection on God’s faithfulness which shows itself in the fact that “God keeps all his promises” (*ibid.*, 291). As we have seen, however, he makes a similar claim under the head of God’s constancy. Which is it then? Is promise keeping an expression of the attri-

- bute of greatness or an attribute of goodness?
- ³²Ibid., 295.
- ³³Ibid., 296.
- ³⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 156.
- ³⁵Ibid., 160-80.
- ³⁶Ibid., 157.
- ³⁷Ibid., chapters 12 and 13.
- ³⁸Ibid., 209.
- ³⁹B. S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 10.
- ⁴⁰See the excellent discussion of the differences between royal grant covenants and suzerainty treaties in Michael S. Horton, *God Of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 41-43.
- ⁴¹For the exegesis of Exod 34:6-8, I am indebted to J. Carl Laney's helpful article ("God's Self-Revelation In Exodus 34:6-8"). Laney independently covers some of the same ground as this present article, especially with regard to Grudem and Erickson, and I warmly commend it.
- ⁴²Ibid., 36.
- ⁴³Ibid.
- ⁴⁴Jeremiah 18:7-10 provides the principle behind divine relenting and best explains the divine consistency in not judging Ninevah as had originally been promised.
- ⁴⁵Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), chapter 18, esp. 500.
- ⁴⁶Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2007), 422.
- ⁴⁷Ibid.
- ⁴⁸Ibid.
- ⁴⁹Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History*, 24.
- ⁵⁰Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways Of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108 (emphasis in original). Moses Maimonides took a different view. As Maimonides commentator Julius Guttman rightly observes, "According to Maimonides these [the *Middoth*] do in reality not apply to the essence of God but to His works, which indicate by attributing to God that quality which in man would produce corresponding activities. The thirteen Dispositions which were revealed to Moses are then to be interpreted in this sense" (Maimonides, *The Guide*, 210). Maimonides position is deeply influenced by Greek philosophy at this point and leaves one in deepest agnosticism as to what God is really like.
- ⁵¹I. Howard Marshall, *A Pocket Guide To Christian Beliefs*, (3d ed.; London: InterVarsity, 1990), 39-42.
- ⁵²These statistics are found in Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 94-95. Some of the more significant exegetical portions can be found collected in *Karl Barth: Preaching Through the Christian Year* (ed. John McTavish and Harold Wells; trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978).
- ⁵³Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1964), 15.
- ⁵⁴Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomena to Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), chapters 7-9.
- ⁵⁵Ibid., 271 and 274, respectively.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., 271 n. 17. I have attempted to make a start on such a project in a work on the Holy Spirit that utilizes not just systematic theology and biblical commentaries but also biblical theologies: *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine Of The Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). On method, also see my article "God, doctrine of," 259-63.
- ⁵⁷Richard Lints, "Thinking Systematically about Theology," *Modern Reformation* (January/February, 2003), 28.

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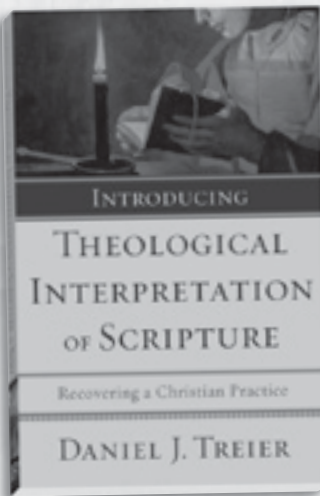
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