

BOOK REVIEW

## Janet Soskice, *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology and Scripture*

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In *Naming God*, Janet Soskice reclaims the ‘divine names’ tradition in Christian thought. This much-anticipated volume is the culmination of the Cambridge professor’s life-long work on theological language, which includes the ground-breaking *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon Press, 1985) and *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (OUP, 2008). *Naming God* does not catalogue the diverse names given to God, but rather, analyses the *use* of divine names in philosophy, theology, and scripture – specifically the theological and scriptural practice of calling God by name and calling on God in prayer. Soskice’s careful exegesis (especially of Exodus) and linguistic analysis demonstrate that practices of divine naming generate meaning differently when compared to attribution-focused theological language. This work’s interdisciplinary character engages theology, philosophy, biblical studies, history, and linguistics in a manner that is accessible to non-experts.

Central theological terms such as ‘eternal’, ‘almighty/omnipotent’, ‘good’ and even ‘Being Itself’ have been both defended and attacked as rationally demonstrable divine attributes. Such terms take on an entirely different character, however, when considered as part of the wider family of divine names (e.g. Wisdom, Lamb, Rock, Key of David, etc.), as they regularly were before the modern period. Soskice applies this insight in close examinations of four giants of the Jewish and Christian traditions, rehabilitating them from the charge of merely dressing-up the ‘philosophers’ God’ with pious scriptural trimmings. To be painfully brief: attending to the devotionally Jewish and exegetical quality of Philo’s writings reveals metaphysical ruptures between his thought and middle Platonism; Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual ascent owes more to Moses on Mt. Sinai than to neo-Platonic ascent; Augustine’s God who is ‘Being itself’ finds its precedent in the great I AM, not Plotinus; and for Aquinas, analogy is a semantic tool for understanding divinely disclosed names, not an epistemological bridge from worldly knowledge to divine insight.

Taken as a whole, *Naming God* makes a decisive intervention in fraught, decades-long debates over ‘divine attributes’. Soskice’s tone, however, is that of a scholar carefully retrieving lost treasures to share with others, winning over her readers rather than taking prisoners. To alter the terms of this debate, she gradually builds the case for an alternative account of key evidence (texts in the biblical and theological canon) which the divine-attributes frame cannot accommodate. It is commonly presumed that ‘divine attributes’ treat God’s essential being and are conceptually determinable and comprehensible apart from appeals to revelation. These terms supposedly stem

from the ‘God of the philosophers’, which lumps together ancient Hellenistic thought with Enlightenment Deism and its modern descendants. The 20th-century phrase ‘the God of classical theism’ designates ancient and medieval theology which allegedly absorbs this ‘philosophers’ God’ of attributes.

This frame has conditioned a vast amount of theological discourse, for instance: disputes over univocal and analogical language; Heidegger’s condemnation of ontotheology; Barth’s rejection of ‘natural theology’; certain Protestant objections to metaphysics and philosophy; Walter Kasper’s attack on ‘subsistent being itself’; and discussions of whether a more ‘philosophical’ or ‘classical’ God is conceptually coherent (Anthony Kenny and Richard Swinburne), tyrannical and heartless (David Hume and Jürgen Moltmann), or compatible with Christ (Eleonore Stump and Katherine Sonderegger). *Naming God* stands out because it advances a persuasively supported position that subverts the reigning paradigm of attribution-focused language.

Soskice’s paradigm-shifting argument makes two essential moves: first, it shifts attention from divine terms themselves to how terms are used. In the ancient Greek world, to name meant either to speak to a thing’s essence or categorise it by genus. By contrast, Jews and Christians understood divinely and scripturally granted names to be a gift of grace, one that enabled them to call out to the God whom they could neither know in essence nor categorise. With the aid of modern linguistics, Soskice shows that names may refer to something without presuming to classify it or to comprehend its essence; the slightest of acquaintances is enough to enable reference by name. Moreover, one only learns the content of a divine name within a context of prayer, a sense of God’s saving purposes, and a plethora of other divine names. Thus, as one uncovers these terms’ scriptural grounding and its impact on their meaning, what were supposedly philosophical attributes become transfigured into faithful names for God. For instance, ‘[t]he Bible itself provides the grounds for saying that God is “Being Itself” – not a far-away God, but a God who is at the heart of everything and near to everyone. ... This is not the “god” of the philosophers but a God who is active, loving and free – a God who can call and be called upon and indeed be with the people’ (p. 39).

Soskice’s second key move is to explicate how *creatio ex nihilo* radically differentiates ancient Jewish and Christian thought from Hellenistic philosophy. This doctrine is the opposite of a borrowed Greek idea, since for something to come from nothing was an anathema to Hellenistic thought. As Soskice demonstrates, the *ex nihilo* ‘represents a defensive response to Greek philosophy, and [is] “biblical” in its desire to defend the God of Moses and the priority of scripture. It is a scripturally driven piece of Christian metaphysics’ (p. 78). This insight decisively undermines the presumption that so-called ‘classical theism’ is the philosophers’ God of attributes. Grounding the practice of naming God in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* ensures that this *use* of these names remains robustly distinct from what ‘classical theism’ is often presumed to be.

Soskice’s paradigm shift and individual case studies have significant implications for the doctrine of God, theological method, philosophical theology, and biblical exegesis, as well as clear generative potential in several areas for others to investigate and build further.

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