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## Book Review: The God Who Makes Himself Known (Blackburn)

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# Book Review

Morgan Philpott

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**W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*.** New Studies in Biblical Theology, Edited by D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

In this recent contribution to IVP's New Studies in Biblical Theology series, W. Ross Blackburn joins his voice to others in the effort to read the Old Testament at once on its own terms and through the lens of the New Testament. Faced with fragmenting source-criticism and thematic complexities, Christian readers have struggled to discover a coherent theology in the book of Exodus, as well as to relate it to an overarching biblical theology or narrative. *The God Who Makes Himself Known* offers as a possible solution an integrative reading of Exodus which assumes God's "missionary heart" and universal interests as its center.

Following an introduction in which Blackburn introduces his method and defends his use of the word *missional* as appropriate to the study of the entire Bible, there are six major sections to the book, each commenting upon a portion of the text. The author prefaces the body of the book with open admission of his own evangelical commitments and states outright his "expectation that [the Bible] is the product of a unified voice" (20–21). While he takes the time to acknowledge his many contemporaries who would disagree with his rejection of the primacy of historical-critical scholarship, he maintains that confessional scholars such as himself may read the Bible as a unity in its entire canonical context with intellectual integrity and toward a valid interpretation.

The first section, covering selected texts in Exodus 1.1—15.21, is bookended by discussions of 6.3, a problematic text to anyone disregarding source theory. How can God say to Moses that he had not revealed himself by the name YHWH to the patriarchs, when the patriarchs themselves used the name (e.g., Genesis 15.2)? To Blackburn, this indicates that God in 6.3 reveals not a new name, but "a new and more complete understanding of the name" (27). Specifically, through God's renewed self-revelation to Israel and his unprecedented great works on their behalf in Egypt, he begins to assert his supremacy on a worldwide scale in a way he had not done before. A polemic element not found in Genesis—God as a warrior and a deity who will suffer no peer—thus arises in in the exodus account as well as in the legal materials.

A second and briefer section (15.22—18.27) discusses the significance of Israel's trials in the wilderness. Countering Noth and others who treat this portion of Exodus as merely a transition between Egypt and Sinai, Blackburn argues for the continuing vitality of God's universal interest in the wilderness narrative as well. In short, the conditioning of the people's obedience and trust is a necessary prelude to the giving of the Law, by which God will prepare them to carry out his purposes in the world. In the author's own words, "the wilderness section describes how God makes himself known to Israel, so that he might make himself known through Israel" (65, emphasis original).

Blackburn's following section, that on the law (19–24), reflects the uniquely Christian difficulty over the juxtaposition of law (which he defines as what the people must do for God) and gospel (what God has done for his people) in Exodus. Paying particular attention to the commands about idols and the exclusivity of God, he extrapolates select principles of the law from the Decalogue and explains their relevance to his thesis. Toward

this end, he makes much of 19.6 (and its echo in 1 Peter 2.9)—Israel as treasured possession, priestly kingdom and holy nation—and interprets the rite in 24 as the people’s sanctification for the purpose of ministering to the world.

The fourth and sixth sections are respectively concerned with the instructions for and construction of the Tabernacle (25–31 and 35–40). The canonical order does matter: that the actual construction of the Tabernacle follows the tragedy of the Golden Calf is important because it physically confirms the renewal of the covenant and the mission that signifies. In line with his premise, Blackburn has the burden of demonstrating that the Tabernacle material is theologically integrated with the rest of the book. Finding a continuance of God’s self-revelation in the renewed warrant of divine identity (“I am the LORD their God” [29.46]), he observes additionally that the creation of the holy place establishes “the arena of God’s presence” (150), the boundaries of which Israel’s presence and example will eventually expand.

The Tabernacle chapters sandwich the incident of the Golden Calf (32–34), a story which Blackburn appropriately reads through the famous but confusing creed of 34.6–7. The integrity of God’s name among the nations and the related survival of Israel are imperiled together, as mercy follows judgment in bewildering contrast. In the end, Blackburn turns to the New Testament for resolution, finding in Jesus’ actions the full manifestation of which Moses’ intercession was only a type, and ultimately making God’s apparently selfish concern for his own reputation selfless through the forgiveness of his people and the gift of his Son to the world.

If *The God Who Makes Himself Known* has a weakness, it is built into the very core of the author’s premise: that a single theological aspect can account for the diversity of the book of Exodus—that is, without doing injustice to those places where the theme is less pronounced. This objection need not take issue with the author’s confessional stance; in some places, the conclusions simply feel forced. Even the casual reader of Blackburn’s book will notice that God’s missional interest finds fertile soil in his discussions of some portions of the text and fails in others to take root organically. All of this is not to discredit the essential worth of the volume, but only to suggest that a richer thesis is needed to fully describe the God of Exodus and of the Bible as a whole.

While engaging and well-organized, the book is written at a fairly high level and assumes prior knowledge of the critical issues of Exodus scholarship as well as the history of the conversation on Old Testament theology; however, even a reader with little or no background in biblical scholarship may find its theological commentary a valuable supplement to his or her study of Scripture. Despite this caveat, *The God Who Makes Himself Known* would find its most productive place in either an undergraduate or graduate class in biblical theology or in the library of a preaching or adult education minister. While not everyone will agree with many of Blackburn’s points, his book has the potential to be a meaningful place of dialogue among other faithful readers who have come into their own method of study with their faith intact.

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