Robert J. Wilkinson

Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God: From the Beginnings to the Seventeenth Century. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 179. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015. Pp. xi + 587. Hb, \$277.

For over two millennia, Christians and Jews have generally refrained from pronouncing the proper name of God as attested by the Bible, and hence the name itself has come to be referred to by a variety of surrogates, including “Tetragrammaton,” a word that predates the common era. The Tetragrammaton is *the* divine name of the Old Testament, where it appears more than twice as often as all other theonyms taken together. Contrary to what was commonly supposed as recently as a generation ago, the Tetragrammaton remains comparably important in the New Testament—if anything, it becomes more important still. It occupies a central place in the piety of Jesus (see Matthew 6:9; John 12:28) and is referred to obliquely well over a thousand times by New Testament writers, thus easily outnumbering all references to God as “Father.” The Tetragrammaton also occupies a singular place in Christian theology, playing a role as goad and stimulus that in its sheer complexity, variety, and unruliness has few equals.

The appearance of Robert J. Wilkinson’s book is therefore welcome. *Tetragrammaton* is an attempt to chart Western Christian knowledge of the Hebrew divine name YHWH through to roughly the middle of the seventeenth century. The author intends his book as “a work of history,” and therefore eschews any theological comment “as inappropriate” (38). Even with this (understandable, though regrettable) delimitation, the scope of the book is ambitious and its theme fascinating.

The book is divided into three chronological sections: “The Eclipse of the Name” (roughly 300 BCE–500 CE), “Times of Ignorance” (500 CE–1400 CE) and “The Rediscovery of the Name” (1400 CE–1700 CE). The first section derives its title from the fact that whereas the Tetragrammaton routinely appears in Jewish biblical texts, in both Hebrew and Greek, it virtually never appears in biblical texts of Christian origin, being represented instead by the surrogate *kyrios*, or, more precisely, by the distinctively Christian abbreviation ΚΣ. The implications of “eclipse” notwithstanding, however, the author makes the important point that this shift in scribal convention does *not* signal a lack of Christian interest in the Tetragrammaton. Though the divine name may be physically absent in New Testament texts, yet “its presence can be detected indirectly” (104), inasmuch as the New Testament writers often allude to it obliquely in formulating their convictions about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Gradually, however, an increasingly gentile church lost its capacity to

detect these allusions, and Christian consciousness of the divine name was “eclipsed” in the ordinary sense for most of the patristic period. What took its place, as Wilkinson demonstrates, was in part a preoccupation with the “other” name revealed to Moses, “I am the One who is” (Exodus 3:14), which Christians typically understood as a name in its own right, unrelated to the Tetragrammaton on which it comments in Hebrew (Exodus 3:15).

The second section, “Times of Ignorance,” focuses on the Middle Ages, and again the title is somewhat misleading. Wilkinson demonstrates that far from being a time of general neglect, the first centuries of the second millennium saw renewed Christian interest in the Tetragrammaton, now interpreted as the supreme mysterious sign of the unity or even triunity of God. The author helpfully locates this rebirth within the broader history of relations between Jews and Christians, including the dawning Christian awareness of kabbalah and the slow development of Christian Hebraism. The author also devotes a chapter to the Tetragrammaton in Christian popular devotion and magic, showing that interest in the divine name was not confined to academic and orthodox circles.

“The Rediscovery of the Name,” the last section, coincides with the author’s primary historical expertise, and documents the flowering of Christian fascination with the Tetragrammaton from the Renaissance to the early modern era, when at last philology displaced theology as the prime motor of concern. The broad scope of material covered in this section is indicated by the titles of some of the chapters that comprise it: “The Tetragrammaton in Vernacular Bibles, Popular Print, and Illustration,” “The Tetragrammaton and Scholars at the Time of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations,” and “The Demystification of Language and the Triumph of Philology.”

Each chapter is filled with detailed descriptions of figures and texts. One example among many is the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680). Kircher’s high view of the Tetragrammaton is represented in his complex diagram *The Mirror of the Mystical Kabbalah*, which Wilkinson reproduces in black and white. The diagram depicts a sun with twelve rays, at the center of which we find a circle containing the Tetragrammaton and the christogram IHS. “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is inscribed in the twelve rays of the sun, pointing outward to a ring of seventy-two names of God, each comprised of four letters and associated with the different nations that make up humanity. According to Kircher, then, all nations thus possess a God-given divine name, even as “the entire world is supported by the power and efficacy of the Tetragrammaton, and all peoples are bound together in the cult of true religion” (443).

Unfortunately, the book is not without some serious flaws. It is only to be expected that an author who covers so much ground will be surer of foot in some places than others, and that errors of citation will creep in here and there

(e.g., Charles Gieschen, not Gliessen). At times, however, the author seems to lose his footing entirely, as in a section entitled “Our Father” (108–09). Here the author incongruously discusses the High Priestly prayer (John 17), where the phrase “our Father” never appears. The author does mention Jesus’s references to “your name that you have given me” (verses 11–12), but cites the phrase incorrectly and strangely omits to discuss its postulated relevance to the Tetragrammaton. The book’s organization is also puzzling at times. For example, the author sensibly divides patristic views on the burning bush into two sections, one on the Tetragrammaton itself, one on “I am He who is,” only to place Eusebius’s views on the former in the latter section. Frustrating, too, is the author’s habit of frequently alluding to his own earlier discussions of a reader or topic without providing page references to help the reader locate the relevant passage.

The book’s most serious limitation, however, is a general disproportion between fact gathering on the one hand, and historical and doctrinal analysis on the other. In the end, the book’s strengths and limitations resemble those of a lovingly-assembled antiquarian’s cabinet. One is grateful for the effort that went into gathering the collection, but hopes the precious contents will one day be presented in a brighter historical and theological light.

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