

**F. Gerald Downing, *Formation for Knowing God: Imagining God: At-One-ing, Transforming, for Self-Revealing* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2015). xxiv +263 pp. paperback**

Downing presented the forerunner to this text in 1964 entitled, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* And, to the discomfort of the wider evangelical world, the answer was “No, not yet” (ix). Downing was investigating the concept of “revelation” as seen in the Bible and analysing the understandings that unfolded with history with the result that he questioned the widely-held belief that God’s purpose through Christ was to reveal Himself. Instead he suggested that such an understanding was merely the result of human epistemological perception as fruit of the enlightenment. Downing preferred that “God’s main purpose in Christ . . . expressed in terms other than ‘revelation’ [was] reconciliation, justification, salvation, atonement, redemption, new creation” (xvi). In this current text, Downing returns to this same, no-less challenging topic, to further shore up his thesis in light of scholarship that has emerged in the last half century. In the Introduction, Downing restates his thesis much as before as one would expect of an author whose research and writing is clearly coloured by the desire to express himself with and through integrity. Downing acknowledges his earlier critics as well as those who also championed the cause. He then unfolds his updated variations on the original theme in the eight chapters that follow and which give meat to the concepts in the title of the book.

Chapter 1 attends to issues related to the use of language and words, and particularly since the 1964 version did not give weight to Wittgenstein’s work concerning the change of meaning that can come about when, importantly, words are considered in the context of the text in which they appear. Downing refers also to the importance of “implicature” and the question of subjective objectivity that claims to God-given knowledge of God inevitably invite. In this chapter Downing begins his play on words of atonement in terms of at-one-ment with God, ending the chapter with the tantalizing promise that “in the final chapter . . . the possibilities of an at-one-ment with God that can even be wordlessly enjoyed will be explored” (33).

Chapter 2 attends to reconciliation through Christ and at-one-ment, and issues related to the terms “self” and “revelation.” In relation to self and knowing, he returns again to his 1964 assertion that “We do not yet have an ‘I-Thou, Thou-I’ relationship with God” (53). Of revelation, and presumably as a means of urging that God does not reveal himself despite sending Christ, Downing suggests that “Jesus, God’s Christ, God’s Son, has been physically displayed, and this has enormous significance: but a significance not handed on a plate, rather a significance to be explored”

(62). In now turning to the issues of secular and theological knowledge, Downing appeals to the Qur'an and Muslim theologians making "more coherent sense" (64) of knowledge and what is actually knowable.

Chapter 3 sees Downing turn to the Old Testament or what he prefers to call "the Jewish scriptures" and finds knowledge about God more in terms of "the story behind the story" than through direct revelation *per se*. He does, however, draw out the motif of reconciliation as seen in the narrative accounts of Jacob and Joseph, this also being one of the key purposes assigned to the incarnation of Jesus.

Chapter 4 turns the focus to the New Testament, and revelation and knowledge of God in relation to the person of Jesus. An example of Downing underscoring his thesis can be seen, for instance, when he acknowledges that in John's "Gospel and the Letters of John: there is so much stress there on the vocabulary of 'knowing' . . . [but] the evangelist has in effect, if only implicitly, made it clear that 'in fact' we do not know Jesus himself sufficiently well to find in him the self-revealing of God (in any deep sense of 'self')" (96).

Chapter 5 appeals to the writings of early theologians from the first 100 years after Christ and onwards concluding that they denied "that we have any clear knowledge of God, [and they were] right not to consider that God has revealed God's 'self (in any full sense of 'self')'" (145).

In chapter 6, the text now turns to the tricky question of how a God who has given no self-revelation can also be a loving God and looks to overturn the atheistic overtures of Schellenberg, who used such an argument as ammunition for the atheist cause. Inevitably the issue of God's hiddenness also comes to the fore, and equally inevitably so do the issues of faith and trust, the former of which becomes the platform for chapter 7. It is followed by chapter 8 which is revealingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, entitled "A Very Brief Agnostic (Unknowing) Systematic Theology for Awaiting God's Self-Revelation" (191) in which Downing concludes that life is to be lived by faith and "To come to know God more fully must at least involve and include our growing awareness of God . . . [so that] We may in such trust look forward to being brought, perhaps endlessly being brought, towards the self-revelation of our loving, creator, sustainer, redeemer" (213).

Downing appears to have reinforced his case with significantly greater strength than his first attempt in 1964 having now been able to draw upon a greater breadth of supporting material and from a wider field of academic enquiry. One might ask, though, whether his inclusion of reference to the Qur'an is more likely to reduce sympathy for his cause from the wider evangelical readership rather than win him the larger hearing that would appear to have been his goal in rewriting his earlier text. Interestingly, he has made use of a number of quirky pen-drawing

sketches at the beginning of each chapter as a means of illustrating the topic of each chapter. Some are accompanied by what suggest a dry sense of humour which serves to lighten the content whilst others might leave the creatively-inclined reader to ponder on what greater depths are alluded to by the illustration but have been left unsaid.

At the end of the day, one might say “each to his or her own and does this question of God’s self-revelation really matter in light of eternity?”—perhaps for the analytically-minded scholar in the quest for personal integrity concerning systematic theology issues but possibly not for the evangelical layman seeking to “run the race” in the face of life’s contingencies in relationship with a, by faith, Sovereign God. Downing’s work is unlikely to provide fuel for the Sunday sermon but certainly makes for a valuable contribution to the systematic theology bookshelf.

Reviewed by Dr Vee J.D-Davidson