

***Under One Crown: A Renewed Look at Creation in Word and Image.* By Raachel Nathan Jurovics, Sarah Stein, Mary Blocher, and illustrated by Andrea Gomez. Raleigh, North Carolina: Under One Crown Publishing, 2019. iix+76 pages. \$36, paperback.**

***The Name: A History of the Dual-Gendered Hebrew Name for God.* By Mark Sameth. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020. xiii+175 pages. \$44, cloth; \$24, paperback; \$9.99, eBook.**

Bewilderment is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “to lose in pathless places, to confound for want of a plain road.” Bewilderment is a sacred, even salutary process, correcting “the inclination to unwarranted certainty,” write theologians James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, in their essay, “Transgender Lives: From Bewilderment to God’s Extravagance.”¹ Taken as a spiritual state, bewilderment asks for humility, curiosity and the courage to “not know.” If we have that valor, we will encounter “a signature feature of creation—God’s extravagance. We inhabit a universe that dazzles with its size and diversity,” the Whiteheads write.

As theologians and institutions resist, explore or embrace nonbinary views of individuals created in the divine image, bewilderment indeed carries us forward. Theologians, mystics and social historians have long explored ideas of the divine feminine and masculine, matriarchy and patriarchy. Now this journey comes to a new vista: the nonbinary identity of God itself.

A scholar of Judaism and text (medieval literature). Raachel Jurovics, and her colleagues, Sarah Stein, professor of media studies, Mary Blocher, a feminist reader, and Andrea Gomez, an artist and illustrator, have come together to create an extraordinary extended *midrash*, *Under One Crown: A Renewed Look at Creation in Word and Image*. Together they create a new conversation based on traditional Jewish sources and their own exceptional creativity. *Under One Crown* is based on a text from the Talmud (*Babylonian Talmud Tractate Chullin* 60b), which explains how God negotiated with the Sun (a masculine, dominant entity) and the Moon (a feminine, nondominant entity) for their respective positions, based on Genesis 1:16, “And God made the two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; and the stars.”

In the Talmud, the Moon is feminine and is told to diminish herself because, the Sun asks (or rather states in the form of a question), whether it is possible “for two kings to serve under one crown?” The binaries of day-night, greater-lesser, masculine-feminine, light-shadow undergird the Chullin text and the Moon is given something of a consolation prize. Thankfully Jurovics and her colleagues take up the text in the form of a two-voiced exchange, between Chullin itself, representing “the instructions of our Father,” and the Moon, *Torat Imeinu*, “the Torah of our Mother.” (from Proverbs 1:8)

The resulting conversation, synthesis and creation is enthralling and deeply satisfying. Gomez’ beautiful illustrations, truly visual *midrash* not incidental decoration, punctuate the written

¹ James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, “Transgender Lives: From Bewilderment to God’s Extravagance,” in *Pastoral Psychology*, 63 (2014): 171–184.

text, offering the reader time to pause and contemplate. This book is a meditation and living witness to the rabbinic dictum of Torah being “black fire [the letters of Torah] written on white fire [the spaces in between and around the letters].” Rather than a tale of diminishment, *Under One Crown* creates of Chullin 60b a redemptive story of complementarity, creativity, and esteem: “Partner me with my beloved, the Sun, and I will nurture the boundless potential of life and transformation on Your Earth.” (p. 35) Using the fact of the lunar-solar calendar of Judaism, the Moon sighs, “Ah, then, by the Sun will they count the order of things; by the Moon will they discover the meaning of their days.” (p. 43). The larger metaphor of the text is that diversity, in whatever it forms, is not a cosmic or human mistake, nor a matter of having to resolve or merge differences, but rather an opportunity to dwell in the richness of the mystery of God’s multifarious expressions. We learn not only to be comfortable with uncertainty but be enriched by it.

Jurovics and her colleagues weave the crown image from Chullin with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, a mapping of divine energies in creation that is sometimes depicted similarly to the chakras in the human body. Atop this mystical depiction sits a conduit, *Keter*, crown: “Master of the World! It is possible for two rulers to govern under the same Crown, the Crown beneath which every form of being in all its created diversity reveals your boundless power.” (p. 35) The mutuality of Sun and Moon, masculine and feminine, of mutuality, reaches a crescendo with the revelation that the interbeing is not only of counterparts, but of all creation and God as well: “And the Moon and the Sun bowed beneath the Crown, in awe of the words of the covenant, which bind God as well as human beings.” (p. 55) Indeed as the Whiteheads claim, we are gifted with the blessing of God’s extravagance. The text’s endnotes provide accessible, scholarly sources for this extraordinary *midrash*.

Mark Sameth, who has been named “one of America’s most inspiring rabbis” by *The Forward* (2013), made waves with his *New York Times* op-ed “Is God Transgender?” (August 12, 2016), a topic on which he has been publishing since 2008. *The Name: A History of the Dual-Gendered Hebrew Name for God* is a scholarly, readable adventure, frankly, a page-turner, brimming with not only ample proof for his thesis that the tetragrammaton is in fact a dual-gendered name, but also with a trove of meticulous research in history, sociology and linguistics. From the beginning in the contexts of the ancient Near East and the regularly attested use of non-binary-gendered human/divine leaders and deities, Sameth bewilders in the best sense: he challenges the theological accretions, historical impositions and social power dynamics that are the givens of a masculine YHVH. The reader is granted new eyes with which to see the bewildering terrain.

Sameth’s sweeping thesis begins in antiquity (ca. 2700 BCE ff.) sojourns through each major epoch of Jewish history, including the important centers of Jewish life from Second Temple era Jerusalem to Egyptian and Babylonian captivities, from medieval centers of the Rhineland and France, to the development of early Kabbalah in Italy and Spain. He ends with modern and contemporary teachers. Through it all he carefully and compactly traces sources so skillfully that one feels like the text is an incredible travelogue and detective novel at the same time.

As with *Under One Crown*, Sameth frequently invites us to see familiar texts/terrain with eyes ready for wonder: in Psalm 29, God as The Name “is a stereotypically manly God who causes the cedars of Lebanon to convulse (as in an earthquake)” (29:5) and also as (29:9) “a traditional fertility goddess, causing deer to convulse (as in labor). The suggestion is of a deity of dual gender.” (p.19)

He notes correctly that much is lost in translation from the Hebrew, where many of his observations are more apparent but no less stunning.

Sameth's work is no mere cherry-picking of proof texts. Rather, it is a careful examination of both texts and context, including social history of civilizations neighboring the ancient Israelites, the realities of politics, mysticism, sociology and even touching on neurobiology: "Human beings tend to live in a world of either or. The time of day is either day or night, the season is seedtime or harvest, and people are friends or foes." (p. 13) A future study might put Sameth's thesis into conversation with, for example, neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky's *Us/Them* analysis in *Behave: Human Beings at Our Best and Our Worst*: "Decreasing essentialist thinking [something is as it appears because that is its essential being] via individuation is a powerful tool," and "emphasizing individuation and shared attributes, perspective taking ... lessening hierarchical differences, and bringing people together on equal terms" lessen adverse binary effects.²

Exploring depictions of God in the period from 586 BCE to 70 CE (Chapter 3), Sameth makes an astonishing statement: "By presenting God—the generating force of existence—as both male and female, both singular and plural, the Hebrew Bible seems to be suggesting multiple truths: differentiated (even seemingly oppositional) forces are manifestation are an essential, fundamental unity; within that unity, reality is fluid; more than one story can, therefore, paradoxically be true; and appearances notwithstanding, the notion that reality can be divided up and placed in into static, unchanging categories is an illusion. Rather, everything is one." (p. 41) *The Name* is filled with such magnificent poetry throughout.

Of particular note is *The Name's* final chapter, "Interpreting THE NAME: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." Here Sameth points toward the social implications of his conclusion of a dual-gendered name of God: that religion may be more accessible, women and girls are empowered, sourced support for the evolution of gender conceptualizations, and an increased possibility of world peace through the enfranchisement of *all* humans being "in the image of God."

It is so interesting to read *Under One Crown* and *The Name* together, as conversation partners. Their styles are complementary, yet they unify around a thesis of God and God's image being far greater than simple binaries, greater even than duality. Read together, their ideas are transcendent and bewildering. Exploring divinity in this way is as dazzling as the Whiteheads claim it to be.

I recommend these volumes to those who are intrigued by or committed to nuanced theology and its implications for social equity; but I genuinely wish both books would be read by those who are not. I essentially "binge" read *The Name* with relish and pen in hand, ready for not only the major point of *The Name's* thesis of God's dual-gendered name, but Sameth's rich command of sources. He places some of this material in the extensive endnotes, which makes the book worth reading at least twice: once, straight through; then again, taking the time for the endnotes, which are satisfying and credible.

Jurovics' book asks to be read differently. The text is printed in a roomy, contemplative style. Gomez's midrashic artwork is so extraordinary that I physically treat this book with the care I reserve for holy texts and treasured volumes. I decided to read *Under One Crown* in small sittings on the eve of several Sabbaths. I often found myself wishing it could be produced for the stage.

² Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Human Beings at Our Best and Our Worst* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 420; 422.

Taken together, *The Name* and *Under One Crown*, so different stylistically, dance elegantly together in God's extravagance: "Everything is both Receptor and Bestower," (Sameth, p.6, quoting Azriel of Gerona d. 1238) and "Sacred instruction comes to us in a chorus of voices, masculine, feminine, and non-gendered alike, in accord with Torah's primordial paradigm." (Jurovics et al., p. 20) It is that primordial paradigm these two works present in their research and creativity, spaciousness and depth. As the Whiteheads conclude: "The spiritual journey often moves from bewilderment to recognition of God's extravagance. Sometimes this extravagance is itself more than we can fathom—is itself bewildering. But there is now a different feel to this emotion. ... the bewilderment we experience when confronted with God's extravagance ... does not distress us but bedazzles us. We do not search for a safe exit from our confusion but for a place to kneel."³ Whether we kneel or not, we are surely made better by these books.

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³ Whitehead and Whitehead, p. 184.