

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

THE DIVINE NAME OF YAHWEH

The divine name of Yahweh is recorded as having been revealed to Moses in Ex. III.14-15 : "And God said to Moses, I am the God who IS ; thou shalt tell the Israelites, THE GOD WHO IS has sent me to you. And he charged Moses again, That is what thou shalt tell the sons of Israel, that the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has sent thee to them, and this is the name he will be known by for ever ; it shall stand recorded, age after age".¹ In the East a man acquired power over a being if he knew its name. That the name expressed in some way the nature of a being is clear from the names given to children in the Pentateuch.² The name by which God chose to answer Moses' question could not have been a merely arbitrary one for the sake of distinguishing Him from other gods ; it had to give expression to the hopes of Israel, and so the prophet Micheas says : "Let other nations go their own way, each with the name of its own God to rally it ; ours to march under the banner of Yahweh, our God for ever and for evermore" (IV.5, Knox's translation, except the spelling of the divine name). Since only the Divinity Itself could make Its name known, Moses sought the name of God as a credential for the people of Israel. Yahweh, the name that God selects, seems already to have been in use. Various indications are found in the composition of place-names and the names of men, and there is an apparent, though disputed, reference to a god Yaw at Ras Shamra. An entirely new name might have detached some of the Israelites from the God of their forefathers, whereas a name with which some of them were already familiar would perhaps have been more easily accepted. There was nothing to prevent this name from acquiring a new wealth of meaning in the course of time. Hitherto God had been referred to as the Most High, the Eternal, the Omnipotent, and by His dealings with men—the Strength of Jacob, the God of my father.

¹ Knox's translation. The Vulgate version is : "Dixit Deus ad Moysen : Ego sum qui sum. Ait : Sic dices filiis Israel : Qui est, misit me ad vos. Dixitque iterum Deus ad Moysen : Haec dices filiis Israel : Dominus Deus patrum vestrorum, Deus Abraham, Deus Isaac, et Deus Jacob, misit me ad vos ; hoc nomen mihi est in aeternum ; et hoc memoriale meum in generationem et generationem".

² The names defined in this way are those of Cain (Gen. IV.1), Seth (IV.25), Noe (V.29), Isaac (XXI.6), Reuben and the other sons of Jacob (XXIX.31-XXX.24), Phares (XXXVIII.29), Manasse and Ephraim (XLI.51-2), Moses (Ex. II.10), Gersam (II.22), Eliezer (XVIII.4). One may also include the new name given to Abram (Gen. XVII.5), the allusions to the names of Ismael (XXI.17) and Jacob (XXV.25), and the explanation of the names of Phaleg (X.25) and of Babel (XI.9).

Tradition has usually¹ seen in this text a reference to the idea of being or existence, and has generally linked it with our Lord's claim: "Before Abraham came to be, I am" (Westminster Version, Jn. viii.58). In recent years, however, a view² has been advanced that radically reinterprets the significance of this passage. It has, of course, always been agreed that the name could not have had the same wealth of meaning for the Hebrews as it has come to possess for us. For them being was not a statically conceived perfection, but rather something dynamic. God, in the context, is describing Himself as an agency ready to help when He is invoked (iii.12—"I will be with thee"). The Septuagint has encouraged a metaphysical interpretation by translating the declaration in iii.14 as "ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν" ("I am Being"), which influenced the "Ego sum qui sum" of the Latin versions. The Fathers, the theologians of the Middle Ages, and modern exegetes have developed this text as a statement that God is the infinite Being, the Being existing necessarily of Himself. Yet if God had wanted to say, "I am Being", one would have expected a different construction. In Hebrew the verb "to be" is very rarely used as a copula; thus one would not say, "I am the man who slew the lion", but, "I—man that slew the lion".³ The former construction is of the pattern: "I am going where I go", or, "I show mercy where I show mercy".

It is now argued that the name by which God designates Himself must be read in the determined sense of what has gone before, as is the case with those other names defined in the Pentateuch.⁴ The first reply "I am who I am" lays the foundations for the names Ehyeh and Yahweh: God speaks of Himself in the first person (Ehyeh—I am), whilst men speak of Him in the third (Yahweh—he is). The translation now proposed is: "And God said to Moses: 'I am who I am'. And he said: 'Thou shalt say thus to the children of Israel: Ehyeh sends me to you'. And God spoke again to Moses: 'Thou shalt say thus to the children of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob sends me to you. This is my name for ever, it is my memorial from generation to generation'". In assessing God's first reply, "I am who I am", one must remember that in popular usage this name would not be expected to exhaust the

¹ So the new *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 165a. For a defence of the traditional view, see Ceuppens, "Theologia Biblica, De De Uno". The text of Isaiah xlii.8 with its inference (my name . . . my glory) has to be reckoned with.

² This article is little more than a summary of Père Dubarle's article in the *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Theologiques* of January 1951.

³ Instances are: "I am God Almighty" (Gen. xvi.1); "I am Yahweh" (Gen. xv.7, etc.); "I am the God of Abraham" (Gen. xxvi.24, etc.); "I am God, the God of your father" (Gen. xli.3); "I am the God of Bethel" (Gen. xxxi.13); "I am the jealous God" (Ex. xx.5); "I am mercy" (Ex. xxxii.26); etc.

⁴ See Note 2 on previous page.

meaning of the person designated. On the other hand, the solemnity of the occasion demanded more than an empty title.

The original sense of the expression, "I am who I am", necessary for a right understanding of the name Yahweh, must be looked for in parallel texts in the Bible. These are found to be of two kinds : (a) replies of a supernatural being to questions about its name ; and (b) analogous constructions.

(a) In Gen. xxxii.29 and Jg. xiii.18 there are the evasive replies of the angel to Jacob and to Manue respectively. The implication of these replies is that the supernatural being does not easily reveal himself, and always safeguards his mysteriousness and independence. On Sinai (Ex. xxxiii.18-23) God will only reveal Himself on His own initiative, and Moses is only permitted the merest glimpse of His being ; and He "shews favour where he will" (lit. He gives the favour to whom He gives the favour).

(b) The same construction is found in expressions where the verb of the principal clause receives a complement, direct or circumstantial, in the form of a relative clause. This subordinate clause simply repeats the main verb, or else gives a substantive followed by some relative clause (e.g. "He teaches what he teaches", and, "He counts the hours that he counts"). The subject remains the same ; the tense may change. The construction is common to many Semitic languages (notably Arabic and Aramaic) and often does the work of an indefinite pronoun. It is primarily indeterminate in effect, and is especially useful when the writer wishes to generalise.¹

The conclusion advanced is that in Ex. iii.14 the Hebrew certainly expresses indetermination. When man has, on other occasions, asked a similar question, he has received either blank refusal or he has been given an answer with sufficient safeguard for the divine transcendence. The phrase "I am who I am" is a deliberate enigmatic reply, and is best translated literally. God does not wish to define Himself, and His consequent adoption of names, Ehyeh or Yahweh, must be understood in the light of this prefatory declaration. The name is not intended as a definition of the nature of God, nor even of what is most fundamental to His nature. It cannot be made the basis or resumé of all that man can know of God ; rather does it remind the creature of his utter powerlessness to penetrate that Mystery. Israel must be content with the assurance that God is the God who will deliver them from servitude. Furthermore, by this name God allows a certain

¹ Instances are : "They went where they went" (1 Kings xxiii.13) ; "I will go where I will go" (II Kings xv.20) ; "Dwell where you would dwell" (IV Kings viii.1) ; "Send whom thou wilt send" (Ex. iv.13) ; and similarly : Ex. xvi.23, Deut. xxxix.15, Ezech. xii.25 and xxxvi.20, Gen. xliii.14, Esth. iv.16.

familiarity with His chosen people, but He does not surrender Himself. Actually it is the expression "Yahweh, the God who brought you out of Egypt", or its equivalent, that is found everywhere in the Bible as the characteristic of their God.

These verses, far from presenting a determined notion as particularly apt to express what we can know of God, and far from giving us any definition, show us God revealing Himself in a given historical situation, and introducing the name of Yahweh to indicate the impossibility of defining God. This idea of indefinability, of the ineffable, must not be transformed into a negative definition, or become the source of all other declarations about God ; but it is not intended to call a halt to our speculations. The intention is to remind us of the unbridgeable gulf which divides our idea of God from the reality which it strives to express. We can and should speak of God, but always with the realisation of the inadequacy of what we say. Consciousness of our limitations should accompany our praise of Him : "Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty, any thought set limits to his greatness?" says the Psalmist (CXLIV.3) in a song that exalts God for those very attributes that are presupposed in the passage we have been considering : power, goodness and justice.

When Ben Sirach has proclaimed (Ecclesiasticus XLIII.29-35) the work of the Creator in the visible universe, and is about to hymn His solicitude for Israel from the beginning, he stops for a moment to admit man's inability to praise worthily a God Who surpasses all human speech. A better commentary on the verses in *Exodus* can hardly be attempted :

When we have said everything that we can,
 the end of the matter is that He is All.
 Let us praise Him then because we cannot reach Him,
 for is He not greater than all His works ?
 The Lord is terrible and exceeding great,
 and marvellous is His power.
 Raise your voices, you who praise the Lord,
 to their full power ; He is always there to be praised.
 You who exalt Him, search yet for new phrases,
 and be not discouraged for you will still not reach Him.
 Who is there who has seen Him and can speak of it,
 and who shall praise Him as He is ?¹

¹ A translation of Père Dubarle's rendering. .