

Andrews University
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AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF
GOD'S "I AM" STATEMENT
IN EXODUS 3:14-17

A Paper

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by

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I. Introduction

Statement of Problem

In Western culture, names do not frequently convey information about the character and qualities of the people they identify. For example, if you were to meet Tiffany Brown, her name would not tell you anything specific about who she is or what she is like. In contrast, names in biblical times communicated important information about the person, or some aspect of their story. In order to obtain a clearer theology of God, the writer of this research paper will study how God revealed Himself to Moses, and what God communicated about His nature to Moses when He revealed His name as I AM.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to discover what God communicated to humanity about Himself when He revealed His name “I AM” to Moses. We will also look at what message God was conveying about His nature—to Moses first, and then to the world—at His proclamation on top of Mt. Sinai.

Methodology and Sources

The writer of this paper will conduct an exegetical study of the texts in issue. Scholarly commentaries, journals, papers and other works will be consulted, studied and considered in this research.

Limitations

Exodus, as the name implies, deals with the Nation of Israel leaving Egypt¹. Exodus 3 takes place just before the liberation of Israel from the Egyptians. It is at this point that we are presented with a dialogue between God and Moses. The dialogue in this chapter comprises the following four exchanges: (1) Ex. 3:4; (2) Ex. 3:5-11; (3) Ex. 3:12-13; and (4) Ex. 3:14-17, 18-22. This paper will focus on the first half of the last exchange, in which God reveals His name to Moses.

¹ The book of Exodus is the second volume in the larger body of work referred to as the *Pentateuch* or *Torah*. Exodus is organized as a bifid, meaning that its information is divided into two major divisions. The first major division (chaps. 1-19) deals with God delivering His people, the nation of Israel, from slavery in the land of Egypt. The second major division (chaps. 20-40) illustrates the covenant that God made with His people after they were brought out of Egypt to the foot of Mt. Sinai. Stated differently, the first division deals with God liberating the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery, while the second division deals with God liberating them from the slavery of sin.

II. Encounter with God: Exodus 3:14-17

Hebrew Text and English Translation²

14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

14 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה
וַיֹּאמֶר פֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

15 God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you ' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.

15 וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
פֹּה־תֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי
יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם
זֶה־שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זְכוֹרִי לְדֹר דָּר:

16 "Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I am indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt.

16 לֵךְ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת־זְקֵנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה אֵלַי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם
יִצְחָק וַיַּעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר
פָּקֹד פְּקֹדְתִי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־הָעֲשׂוּי לְכֶם בְּמִצְרָיִם:

17 "So I said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

17 וְאָמַר אֶעֱלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם אֶל־אֶרֶץ
הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי
אֶל־אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ:

Historical Context

The passage of this paper takes place in the wilderness. Moses had fled from Egypt after Pharaoh sought to kill him. By Ex 3:1, he is married and working for his father-in-law Jethro.

The story resumes when Moses, while tending his flocks, arrives at Horeb, the mountain of God,

² This translation is taken from the NASB.

which is also known as Mt. Sinai. It was here that he encounters God in the form of a flame in the midst of a bush. The passage describes this theophany, during which God enters into a dialogue with Moses. In this encounter, God reveals His name to Moses. In so doing, God responds to Moses' insecurity, while Moses, in contrast, reveals his uncertainty about who God is. Notwithstanding Moses' trepidation, God still uses him as a vessel to lead His people out of their bondage in Egypt.

Literary Structure and Grammatical Study

Exodus 3 is part of a larger chiasmic structure that is framed by oppression at its beginning (Ex 1:1) and end (Ex 6:13).³ Oppression arose in Exodus 1 when a new pharaoh came to power “who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8), and by Exodus 6 that oppression had intensified greatly. So it is that at the height of Israel's hopelessness, we come to the center of the chiasmic structure—Moses' encounter with God.⁴

After analyzing in context the four verses this paper considers, there are several themes that emerge from Ex 3:14-17. We start by considering the backdrop to Ex 3:14. As noted above, this passage is a theophany and a dialogue between God and Moses. We pick up the interchange

³ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Books, 1999), 64.

⁴ Ibid. Dorsey outlines the chiasmic structure on the same page as follows:
 a oppression by pharaoh (1:1-22)
 b Moses comes to pharaoh's house (2:1-10)
 c Moses departs from Egypt (2:11-25)
d Turning point: call of Moses (3:1-4-4:17)
 c' Moses returns to Egypt (4:18-31)
 b' Moses comes to pharaoh's house (5:1-4)
 a' worse oppression by pharaoh (5:5-6:13)

in Ex 3:10 with the Lord commanding Moses to go to Pharaoh and bring His people “out of Egypt,” and therefore, out of slavery. Moses responds with a question, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Ex 3:11). The Lord, in an attempt to allay Moses’ concern, reassures him that He, the Lord God, would go with Moses (Ex 3:12). Here we see that the Lord may already be revealing His identity to Moses via a play on words, namely, His use of the personal pronoun *אֲנִי*, I.⁵ Moses asks, “Who am *I*?” and the Lord responds, “*I* will be with you.” Moses, a shepherd, doubted his own ability to confront the power of Egypt.⁶ God reassures Moses that it was not Moses’ strength that would go before Egypt, rather, it was God’s strength. God would not leave Moses alone. Thus, in this exchange we get a glimpse into God’s nature, one that is all powerful, loving, and one that wants to be with His creation.

Still unsure about his ability to complete the mission, Moses poses the second of five objections⁷ to the Lord, “What is [your] name?” (Ex 3:13). Interestingly, after Moses voices his uncertainty about his own ability,⁸ to which the Lord responds that His presence would go with him, Moses then extends his uncertainty to the Lord’s ability. Moses compares God to his fears. God’s request is indeed daunting; He is asking Moses to confront both Pharaoh and the Israelites. At the time, Pharaoh was the leader of the strongest nation and army in the world, and now God

⁵ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 100.

⁶ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 245.

⁷ Andrews Study Bible: New King James Version (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2010), 77. The Bible organizes Moses’s five objectives as: Who am I? Who are you? What if they don’t believe me? I am not eloquent. Send someone else.

⁸ Peter Enns in the *The NIV Application Commentary* however is stating that here Moses is not declaring a lack of self confidence, rather that his refusal to usurp God’s glory in leading His people out of Egypt (Exodus,100).

commands Moses to liberate the Israelites from Pharaoh's control. And the Israelites themselves were no less a fearful obstacle; he must approach this skeptical nation and convince them that God has indeed sent him. This task seemed particularly intimidating in light of Moses' history with the Israelites. They knew his troubled past. They knew he was raised an Egyptian, had committed murder and was a wanted man in Egypt.⁹ He was not the ideal candidate they would have chosen. Moses was inquiring about something much more than simply the name of God, he was asking about God's very nature.¹⁰

It is on the heels of this question that Moses posed to God, *i.e.*, "What is [your] name?" (Ex 3:13), that we come to the passage that is the subject of this paper. God's response to Moses' question is, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14), which can also be translated in the future tense, "I WILL BE WHATEVER I WILL BE."¹¹ After God reveals His name in response to Moses' second objection, He proceeds, for the balance of the chapter (8 verses), in theophany; He describes His plans in detail, addressing Moses' fears about Pharaoh and the Israelites.

There are several critical themes that emerge from what God is communicating about His nature in a study of what He revealed, and His detailed instructions to Moses. To begin with, in the four verses this paper considers, the verb אָמַר, say, is used by God eight times; three in connection with Moses and five in connection to Himself. This pattern begins in Ex 3:14 when, "God *said*...this is what you are to *say*," and later in that same verse, "thus you shall *say*." Next, in Ex 3:15, "God, furthermore, *said*...*say* to the Israelites." Followed in Ex 3:16, when God

⁹ Enns, 101.

¹⁰ Sailhamer, 246.

¹¹ Andrews, 77.

commands Moses yet again to “assemble the elders of Israel and *say* to them...*saying*.” Finally, in Ex 3:17 God concluded with the words, “So I *said*, I will bring you up out of the affliction.” Eight times in four verses, the Lord is both speaking and directing Moses to speak on His behalf, first to the Israelite body as a whole, and then separately to Israel’s elders. Tell the people and then tell their leaders, it seems as if God wants to ensure His message of hope is conveyed. Say this, say that, and say this too. It is as if there is so much that the Lord wants to communicate with His people who have been in bondage for four hundred years. The Lord had a message of hope that He wanted to share, and He wanted to use Moses to communicate it.

In summary, the first major theme that we have explored has been what the Lord God wanted Moses to do. The second, concerns what God Himself, has been doing. If we look back once again into the beginning of the narrative, we find the Lord in Ex 3:7-8, stating what He has been doing: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people”; “I have heard”; “I am concerned”; and concluding with His rescue “I have come down to rescue” (NIV). Transitioning into Ex 3:16-17, we see a parallel structure of the Lord’s attentiveness and compassion: “I have watched over you”; “I have seen”; and concluding with His reminder of rescue, “I have promised to bring you up out of this misery.” God is telling Moses that He is not an absent God; He is not one who is busy attending other matters. Rather, the Lord has His finger on the pulse of all that is afflicting His children, and He is about to move into action. This brings us to the third and final theme that this paper will consider: God’s promise to be with His people for all time as revealed in His name.

III. Intertextuality: Hi! My Name is YHWH.

Significance of Biblical Names

In the Bible, names of people, places and things carry with them great significance.¹² For example, after Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea and into the wilderness of Shur, they came to a place called Marah, where they could not drink the water because it was bitter. The Bible records that it was “therefore . . . named Marah” because the waters were bitter (Ex 15:23). In another place, the Lord changed Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “father of many nations,” because He had “made [him] a father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:6). The new name expressed the promise that the Lord would manifest in Abraham’s future. Hence we see that names in the Bible could contain a sense of past, present and/or future.¹³

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

If one were to reflect on the name of Adolf Hitler, one might think about Nazi Germany, dictatorship, the Third Reich, totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, anti-capitalism and national socialism. Hitler’s name carries his history. Following this line of thinking, if in telling a name, that said individual’s history is instantly recounted, one could say that the entire Bible is an explanation of the name יהוה [*Yahweh*].¹⁴

¹² Sailhamer, 246. For another illustration of this principle see 1 Sa 25:25.

¹³ J. Gerald Janzen, “What’s in a Name: Yahweh in Exodus 3 and the Wider Biblical Context,” *Interpretation* 33 (1979): 228. Janzen’s article directly suggests that names carry the past and the future, I am suggesting that they also included the present. By looking at my example Marah, its name in the present is Marah due to the fact that it has bitter waters, therefore the element of present appears.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 227.

Perhaps what the Lord was telling Moses when He referred to Himself as “the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:15), was “I am the God whose history you know.” In other words, God could have been trying to encourage Moses by implying, “I am that same mighty God who promised Abraham that his seed would be as numerous as the stars in heaven and as the sand of the seashore” (Genesis 22:17); “I am that same God who brought that promise to life when Isaac’s wife carried two nations of people in her womb” (Genesis 25:23); “I am that same God with Whom Jacob struggled until the breaking of the dawn, and I changed his name to Israel for he had struggled with God and with man and prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). All of this history would have come to mind when God declared to Moses that He was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Moses, when hearing God described as mentioned above, would have heard the voice of a loving Father, the gentle appeal of his great lover, the mighty roar of his Creator. Gerald Janzen, notes that “history is the clue to the character of God, the history is the clue to the meaning of the name.”¹⁵ While God’s history provided a clue into His character, it was His present and future existence that was revealed to Moses.¹⁶ In other words, God was known by Moses and the Israelites as the One who appeared to their forefathers, but somehow it had escaped them that He was the One who presently was with them.

God had promised to always be with His children and now, He was revealing to Moses that this promise to never leave them had not been forgotten. The declaration of His name, I

¹⁵ Ibid, 232.

¹⁶ Andrews, 77.

AM, was to take on new significance.¹⁷ The Israelites would now experience God as more than God of their father's, they would experience Him as their God; they would experience Him as the promise fulfilled.

I AM

How did God reveal Himself to Moses? First, we should consider the very name in question, the name that God reveals to Moses in Ex 3:14, in response to Moses asking for God's name in Ex 3:13. Ex 3:14a opens with "God said to Moses, אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" The question arises whether this response is God's name, or whether it is a statement to Moses about his question.¹⁸ The latter seems most persuasive in light of Ex 3:14b, where God states, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" If "I AM WHO I AM" is the name God reveals to Moses, then in His directing Moses, He should have given His full name, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM WHO I AM has sent me to you.'" But God does not say this. One might conclude that Ex 3:14a is God's way of communicating an aspect of His character, *i.e.* self-existing, and that Ex 3:14b is where the Lord tells Moses His name.

The Lord elaborates on His name in the following verse, Ex 3:15, when He says: "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [*Yahweh*], the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.'" The covenant names "YHWH" and "I AM" are derived from the same verb root הָיָה, to

¹⁷ Allen P. Ross, "Did the Patriarchs Know the Name of the Lord," in *Giving the Sense*, eds. Michael A. Grisanti and David M. Howard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, Inc., 2003), 326.

¹⁸ Exodus, 102.

be.¹⁹ The form of this verb could signify any tense, past, present and future.²⁰ God is telling Moses that His name, and subsequently His character, are a state of being. God is proclaiming that He is all powerful. He exists solely on the merit of His own strength. He needs no other. He is the essence of life. He is the foundational material from which all, animate and inanimate, creation is drawn from. God always IS, God always WILL BE, and God always HAS BEEN. God's character is in His name. What is fascinating about God's declaration, is that God is proclaiming to Moses that He was, is and will ever be, not as an empty statement. God is proclaiming His state of being in the context of Ex 3:7,16.²¹ He is stating that I have seen, I have heard, I am concerned, I have watched and I have promised. It is in this context of His proximity to His children that He declares His ever being. God is stating that He has always been with His children, that He always is with His children and that He will always be with His children. God's very nature is revealed, His nature is to be with His children. God proclaims His eternal and ever pursuing love for His children.

Theology and Application

God loves His creation. From the moment that He created the first couple until today, there has never been a moment that He has not been with us. In Ex 3:14-17 we learn much more than the vocal sounds, or the spelling of the name of a deity. We see the heart of the One who sculpted *Adam* from *adamah* and *ishah* from the side of *ish*. What we learn is that God is

¹⁹ Ibid, 103.

²⁰ George H. van Kooten, ed. *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, The Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity*. (Boston: Brill, 2006), 7.

²¹ Ibid, 8.

intimately familiar with who we are and eager to lead us out of the bondage in which we find ourselves.

Another insight into God's character is found in the location and manner He reveals Himself to Moses. In Exodus 3:1-3, Moses is pasturing his father-in-law's flock when he approaches the foot of Mt. Sinai. It is here that Moses encounters the Lord. Away from the magnificent pyramids and stately cities of Egypt, it is in the desert where Moses encounters God. We see this pattern of God leading His children into the proverbial desert place to speak His lessons to them repeated down through the ages.

Finally, YHWH appears to Moses in the form of a bush that is on fire. This fire defies natural laws; it burns, yet is not consumed. Moreover, the fire burns without the need of fuel itself. Two lessons can be gained from this. First, God shows us that He is like the fire in the bush; just as the fire burns without fuel, so the Lord is self-sustaining.²² Second, God demonstrates that He can come into a humble vessel without destroying it.²³ This alludes to the work God wanted to do through Moses. We can also extend this to ourselves.

IV. Conclusion

We see in Ex 3:14-17 that God revealed much more than just His name; He revealed the essence of who He is. He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—the God who promised, and has always been with us. He is also the great I AM; the One who is with us today and who will be with us forevermore.

²² Ibid, 23.

²³ Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 20.

Christians today may gain great courage from God's self-revelation to Moses in the wilderness. We can take comfort that when He calls us to action, He is not sending us by ourselves. Rather, He Himself will go with us and give us the ability to carry out our work. We can rest in the knowledge that our success does not depend on who we are, nor will it be hindered by our past or the obstacles ahead. Instead, we may know that our success is directly linked to our connection with the all-powerful, all-consuming self-existing One.

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