

## PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF EXODUS 3:14 – A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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I yam what I yam and that's all I yam.

– *Popeye*

### ABSTRACT

The ontological assumptions underlying the Hebrew wording of Exodus 3:14 are rather elusive. As a locus classicus for philosophical speculation since at least the time of the LXX, this verse has shown itself to be open to a multiplicity of explications. As a result, several philosophical readings are available which seek to clarify the concepts encountered in the text with the aid of more elaborate metaphysical or post-metaphysical terms. This paper offers an introductory overview of the reception history of Exodus 3:14, with special attention to representative philosophical interpretations from Platonism to post-modernity.

### INTRODUCTION

Few verses in the Old Testament have attracted such a variety of philosophical interpretations as Exodus 3:14. In the scarcely populated world of philosophical commentary, this verse is arguably the most popular of all scriptural passages. The Hebrew text reads as follows:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם

I will not venture a translation of the verse. Doing so would mean opting for a specific philosophical interpretation, which would not be prudent. There has been no consensus regarding the metaphysical assumptions of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה and אֶהְיֶה since the commencement of philosophical interpretations about 2300 years ago. It must suffice to take cognisance of the fact that familiar interpretations include: “Being” (“I am that which is”, following the LXX), “active presence” (“I will be present”, following the Talmud), “creative activity” (“I will cause to be what I will cause to be”, following Albright); “emotional intensity” (“I am definitely here to act,” following emphasis via repetition in Hebrew) and “a refusal to commit” (“I shall be whatever I shall be”, i.e., the deity answers by telling Moses “whatever”) (see further Gowan 1994:82-85).

Not surprisingly, Cronin (2011:n.p.) recently concluded that Exodus 3:14

remains one of the greatest challenges for biblical exegesis. In this article the objective will not be to meet this challenge, or to defend (or criticize) any particular philosophical reading of the verse. What is on offer is not a novel interpretation of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה and אֶהְיֶה. Instead, my aim is to bring together notable philosophical perspectives on Exodus 3:14 currently scattered in the literature. These will be combined in the form of a descriptive-historical summary narrative that can act as a prolegomenon for more in-depth research on the topic. Methodologically then, the article involves engaging in a very rare strand in reception history: meta-philosophical commentary.

Due to spatial limitations, the samples are limited to a selection of major role-players in the genre. The criteria for this selection were the following:

1. The samples involve a) early philosophically-influenced Bible translations, b) major philosophers (primarily of religion) or c) biblical scholars venturing a philosophical perspective on Exodus 3:14.
2. The interpreter's clarification is clearly influenced by the discourse of a major philosophical tradition.
3. The interpretation involves the use of philosophical language that a) contains overt philosophical assumptions and b) recasts Exodus 3:14 in philosophical terms.
4. The interpretation in question is a) the first or b) representative of the particular philosophical perspective on the text.

These four criteria mean that we shall be skipping over important albeit non-philosophical Talmudic, rabbinic and other noteworthy interpretations of Exodus 3:14. The criteria also warrant the inclusion of some philosophical commentators to the exclusion of others (e.g., Maimonides who offered an extensive philosophical commentary as opposed to Ibn Ezra who, while also a philosopher, was in this case more of a grammarian). The criteria also explain why philosophers of *religion* who commented extensively on Exodus 3:14 (e.g., Marion, Kearny, Ricoeur, Caputo) are enlisted, instead of the major thinkers they are indebted to (Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, etc.) who did not. The criteria also legitimize bracketing the latest linguistic, literary, historical, social-scientific and theological interpretations of Exodus 3:14 in biblical scholarship. Recent commentaries on Exodus that have no philosophical interest are therefore not

included in the consulted literature.

The focus on representative philosophical readings means that there will be gaps in a reception-historical narrative which is made up of what otherwise might seem to be an arbitrary choice of role-players and scene selections. The extended time-frame covered and the limited space of the article warrant foregoing critical or in-depth engagement with the primary (and secondary) source materials. The fact is that such treatments are available in the literature and need not be rehashed here (see Cronin 2011:n.p. for an overview). The current presentation therefore chooses to operate purely from a descriptive (as opposed to evaluative) point of view and the main purpose is to chronicle, rather than to adjudicate.

Even so, the article, taken as a whole, does have something constructive and novel to offer. The unique contribution of the discussion lies in the way it brings together previously scattered philosophical interpretations of Exodus 3:14 under one umbrella. Its functionality lies in data collection and structuring with regard to a rarely discussed research topic, rather than in engaging in philosophical criticism itself. Though the genre of the article is not one of a kind as such (in that there are other historical-philosophical perspectives on Exodus 3:14), it goes a few steps beyond by being more informative, accessible and up-to-date than what is on offer in currently available research (cf. Kearny 2001:20-38; Ricoeur 2003:331-362).

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS

As is well-known, the story of philosophical interpretations of Exodus 3:14 begins with the LXX. The Septuagint (third century B.C.E.) renders the Hebrew *Vorlage* of אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה and אֶהְיֶה into Greek as:

καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸς Μωϋσῆν ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν καὶ εἶπεν οὕτως ἐρεῖς τοῖς  
υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ὢν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς

This seems to clarify the concept of 3:14a as “I am the one who is”, and the absolute of 3:14b as “the one who is” (see Perkins 2009). Philosophically, the LXX translation seems to understand the metaphysical assumptions of Exodus 3:14 as dealing with Being or absolute existence. Modern commentators rightly

note the metaphysical import of the LXX without identifying the particular philosophical tradition behind it. The question remains as to whether the translator was alluding to Plato (424-348 B.C.E.) and his concept of Being (in his *Timaeus* or *Parmenides*) or to the metaphysics of the pre-Socratics (sixth to fifth century B.C.E.), or to Pythagoras (570-495 B.C.E.).

Certainly these are different philosophical viewpoints and whichever we assume is present makes a difference to how the LXX is understood as philosophical commentary. If we take the background as Plato's general philosophy of religion it will mean that to the Greek translators who shared Plato's metaphysical assumptions, Exodus 3:14 suggested that YHWH is transcendent in the sense of being the highest and most perfect being (see Morley 2005:n.p.)

After the LXX the next philosophical reading of note comes from Philo (20-50 C.E.) who was influenced by Middle Platonism, Stoicism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, and Aristotle. Philo used Greek concepts for 3:14b and appears to presuppose the Tetragrammaton's third-person version of the divine name when he translates it as, "He who is" (Philo 1995:75); "the Being who is" (Philo 1995:67), "Him that is" (Philo 1995:99) "the Self-Existent" (Philo 1995:132) "the Self-Existent" (Philo 1995:161). More elaborative, at one point in his *Life of Moses*, Exodus 3:14 is rendered with the following philosophical paraphrase:

First tell them that I am he who is, so that they may learn the distinction between being and non-being, and also be taught that no name at all properly describes me (Philo 1995:75).

The second passage, located in the allegorical treatise *On the change of names*, gives a deeper philosophical analysis that seeks to show that God as Being is not comprehensible to the human mind. This means that for Philo no name can properly be predicated of him. God's nature is to be, and not to be spoken of (see Philo 1995). To understand this we need to clarify the neo-Platonic theology behind this particular reading. The neo-Platonic God, described by the philosopher Plotinus, was believed to be the source of the world of beings, which is the inevitable overflow of divinity. In that overflow, all beings come out of God (*ex deo*) in a timeless process. Though God is beyond description, virtue and truth inhere in God. Because God cannot be reached intellectually, union with the

divine is ecstatic and mystical. This line of thought influenced a number of subsequent interpreters (see Morley 2005:n.p.)

In his work *On first principles* 1.3.6 and in his commentary on the Gospel of John (see Origen 1896:34-35), the Christian interpreter Origen (184-253 C.E.) drew a lot from Plotinus and neo-Platonic ideas. For him YHWH was to be identified with Plotinus' One. So while others would take Exodus 3:14 ("I am that I am") as saying that YHWH is a being *par excellence*, Origen doesn't feel the pressure of this text quite so strongly and for him YHWH was simply above being. For Origen God is the one who truly exists and in fact the source of all being and by combining Exodus 3:14 with Matthew 19:17, he identifies "being" with the concept of "the good," since God is said to be both things in the respective texts.

*The Vulgate* of Jerome (347-420 C.E.) is next and it set the stage for medieval philosophical commentaries on Exodus 3:14 and corresponds closely to the Septuagint in its Latin translation of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה and אֶהְיֶה as "*ego sum qui sum*" and "*qui est*" respectively (which in turn translate into English as "*I am who am*" and "*He who is*"). Like the Septuagint, this translation clearly connotes the concept of absolute existence and Jerome believed it referred to YHWH's absolute and eternal being. Many of the early Latin Church fathers and medieval scholastics followed the Vulgate and understood the אֶהְיֶה of 3:14b as an expression of the most fundamental essence of God, i.e., as "*subsistent being itself*" (*ipsum esse subsistens*). From a philosophical perspective the metaphysical import here goes beyond the LXX – not only divine existence but now also divine essence is read back into the Exodus text (cf. Cronin 2011:n.p.)

The Christian philosopher Augustine (354-430 C.E.) employed both the Septuagint and Vulgate translations in his exegesis thinking of God as "*Being*". Neo-Platonism had a great effect on Augustine's philosophy and his description of YHWH as immutable being echoes that of the Greek thinkers like Parmenides', Plato's "Good" and Plotinus' "One." For Augustine, YHWH announced himself as Being itself when he said "I am who am". For Augustine the text is about the divine's supreme existence, that is to say, the belief that YHWH supremely is, and is therefore unchangeable (see Augustine 1998:XII.2).

Coming to the medieval period, the influence of Aristotelian philosophy

becomes more profound. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) assumed that everything pointed to the divine existence. God, being the highest being, engages in perfect contemplation of the most worthy object, which is himself. God as pure form is wholly immaterial, and as perfect he is unchanging since he cannot become more perfect. This perfect and immutable God is the apex of being and must be eternal because time is eternal. And since there can be no time without change, change must be eternal. And for change to be eternal the cause of change – the unmoved mover – must also be eternal (see Morley 2005:n.p.)

Jewish and Christian philosophical commentators who used Aristotelian philosophy of religion differed from Aristotle in that they did not agree that the deity was bereft of love or unaware of the world. YHWH was not seen as a god who cared nothing for beings, being an unmoved mover. Of course, these interpreters read Exodus 3:14's religious language analogically rather than univocally. We therefore find that Exodus 3:14 was understood to be a self-revelation of the existence and essence of YHWH. The scholastic philosopher Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 C.E.) worked in this tradition and in his philosophical commentary on Ex 3:14 suggested that God is:

Him, in whom alone *is* true being, nay rather who alone is true being, without whom nothing can have wellbeing. *I*, said He, *am that I am*. This is a saying most excellent. For He Himself alone hath true being, whose being is unchangeable. Thus He, whose being is so excellent, may be said to be in so especial a sense, that He may be said alone in very truth to be; in comparison of whom all being beside His is nothing (Anselm 2009:ix).

Clearly this does not go much beyond Augustine but is significant as it seems related to his infamous ontological argument for the existence of God. On the Jewish side the Aristotelian philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.) deals with Exodus 3:14 in Chapter Sixty-Three of Part I of his *Guide for the perplexed* (Maimonides 2007). The context here is his efforts to reconcile the numerous biblical divine names with the perfect unity of God. Briefly stated, Maimonides identified אֱלֹהֵי אֱשֶׁר אֱהְיֶה as a divine name and expands on it only in terms of it being the “explanation” of the name YHWH, and as the “idea expressed by the name” YHWH.

Maimonides contended that אֶהְיֶה derived from the verb root יהיה and connotes the idea of “existence”. He interprets the question Moses asks God in Exodus 3:13 as Moses anticipating that the Israelites would not believe in the existence of God, and so he asks YHWH how he can demonstrate his existence to them. The closest he comes to an interpretation of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה is: “He is the existing Being which is the existing Being”. Maimonides develops his interpretation along the lines that God then taught Moses the “intelligible proofs” by which His existence could be confirmed. Thus Moses was construed as having presented the Elders of Israel with an extensive treatise on Aristotelian thought and in so doing proved to them the existence of God.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.) was also influenced by Aristotle and interpreted the Vulgate’s *sum qui sum* of this passage to mean that God is *ipsum esse subsistens* (“subsistent Being”). However, this reading of Exodus 3:14 is also Augustinian and Neo-Platonic. He can thus write in his *Summa*:

This name ‘He who is’ is most properly applied to God ... because of its signification. For it does not signify form, but simply existence itself. Hence since the existence of God is His essence itself, which can be said of no other, it is clear that among other names this one specially denominates God, for everything is denominates by its form (Aquinas 2007:ST I. Q.13, a.11).

Since YHWH does not receive existence from a different source than himself his existence is his essence, and it is he who gives existence (i.e., being) to all of creation. Still, “existence” is not understood to be a univocal term, as though YHWH existed in the same way we do.

Our next major philosophical thinker is Meister Eckhart (1260-1327 C.E.) who went even further than Aquinas and, based on Exodus 3:14, claimed that existence does not “belong” to God because God is “something loftier than being” (Eckhart 1974:50). Here we find the first attempt to read Exodus 3:14 without the assumptions of onto-theology (a prefiguration of later postmodern readings discussed below). For YHWH is held to transcend even existence itself; he is the cause of all things. God is “above being”. The divine being is therefore inexpressible. He goes further to say that if we are to say that God exist, he contains pure existence. For Eckhart it is the pure existence that is meant in



declaration was thus translated into the German equivalent of, “I will be-there howsoever I will be-there” (Cronin 2011:n.p.)

One historian of Israelite religion of the previous century who ventured an overt philosophical interpretation of Exodus 3:14 was Georg Fohrer (1915-2002). Consider, for example, the following claim about Mosaic Yahwism by Fohrer (1972:72):

According to the only Israelite explanation, that found in Exod. 3:14, the name means that this God is one of whom *hāyâ* can be fully predicated. Since this verb in the Hebrew refers not merely to static existence, but to dynamic and effectual presence, the name ascribes dynamic, powerful and effectual being to Yahweh. Yahweh’s nature, as expressed by his name, is a union of being, becoming and acting – an effectual existence that is always becoming and yet remains identical with itself.

Fohrer speaks of YHWH being “predicated” and as having a “nature” (Aristotelian notions) or when he talks about YHWH’s “existence”, “being” and “becoming” (Platonic concepts). Here we see a rare example of a biblical scholar also part of the history of philosophical interpretations of Exodus 3:14.

Up to now philosophical interpretations of Exodus 3:14 can all be seen as operating with the onto-theological distinctions between being and becoming. Of course, individual cases have distinct influences and differences in nuance so that no generalizations are possible. Meister Eckhart might be considered a notable exception in that he wished to transcend the traditional binary opposites. This prefigures a similar tendency in both the modernist idealist and existentialist readings, as well as the more contemporary readings influenced by the philosophical assumptions of French hermeneutics and post-structuralism. We therefore now turn to postmodern interpretations of Exodus 3:14 in contemporary Continental philosophy of religion.

Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946) is one of several contemporary French philosophers who focus upon the issue of givenness and gift; other notable French thinkers who have addressed this theme are Jacques Derrida and the late Claude Bruaire. In *God without being*, for example, Marion (1995:73-74) argues that when the biblical God announces his name in Exodus “I am who am”

(Exodus 3:14) – what matters is not so much that he gives his name to Moses, but that he gives it. This is related to the Christian mystical tradition of God as love. Hence, in Marion’s reading, God’s most proper name is not being or the scholastic *Ipsum esse subsistens* but “love” – which, for Marion, is the “icon”, as he calls it, which allows the incomprehensible to be seen while impeding any conceptualistic reduction of it.

In *The God who may be*, Richard Kearney (b. 1954) (2001:120) also ventures an interpretation of the concept of *ehyeh ‘asher ‘ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14a. According to him, there is the question of whether to interpret the self-declaration of YHWH as ontological or eschatological. Is YHWH reducing himself to the metaphysics of presence or is he rendering himself immune to it once and for all? In his view, however, a third onto-eschatological view is the way to go. On this view, YHWH is neither being nor non-being but as the possibility of either May-be. Thus the Hebrew is philosophically translated as I-am-who-may-be, which, for Kearney, is a performative rather than a constative expression, invoking “mutual answerability and co-creation”. The God who may be is not the almighty, all-knowing, omnipresent God of onto-theology, but remains a God engaged in history, unconditionally loving and giving, calling us to praxis of love and justice (see Kearney 2001:130).

Another contemporary philosophical reading is that of Paul Ricoeur (1912-2005) (see Ricoeur 2003). After discussing the history of philosophical interpretations from a Christian perspective and building on the work of his co-author Andre LaCocque, Ricoeur (2003:331-362) argues that the Hebrew might be taken to include all philosophical attempts to render it meaningful. For him it is not opposed to what the LXX and Vulgate made of it but actually involves more. The Hebrew is held to presuppose a gap in meaning and since “Being” can be thought of in many ways, perhaps the Hebrews did it in a new manner. In this Ricoeur attempted to remove ontology from the equation to safeguard the text against critique of onto-theology by Nietzsche and Heidegger. He therefore followed Marion in trying to think of God beyond Being.

John D. Caputo (b. 1940) is another Continental philosopher who offered a philosophical improvisation on Exodus 3:14. Indeed, it is a Continental obsession rather than an analytic one to attend to this biblical passage. In his *Prayers and*

*tears of Jacques Derrida* Caputo quips with a wordplay that in a sense “Jah” means “Ja” (“Yes”) so that YHWH means something affirmative (following Nietzsche). Thus Caputo (1997:26) quotes as follows:

God said to Moses ‘I am yes.’ He said further, ‘Thus shall you say to the Israelites, “I am yes has sent me to you. The Impossible, the Incoming”’ (Ex 3:14 NRquasi-SV).

For Caputo this is affirmation of the impossible at the limits – negative theology says yes, and this is why Derrida had to revisit it.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that there have been many philosophical readings of Exodus 3:14 from Platonism to postmodernism. All of these readings were attempts to treat the concepts describing YHWH in the text as somehow philosophically profound. Biblical scholars will no doubt rightly see these more as colourful reinterpretations of the historical sense of the verse (whatever that may have been) than reflective of its intended meaning. Each philosophical commentator attempted to expand on this text by elaborating on what was perceived to be the possible hermeneutical significance of the mysterious theology expressed in the verse. The reception history of the verse can thus be compared to a metaphysical spectrum with realist Platonic or Aristotelian perspectives on the right, through semi-realist German Idealism and Jewish existentialism, to more contemporary non-realist post-structuralist and postmodernist readings. In all this the tendency seems to be a gradual move away from the metaphysical assumptions of onto-theology.

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