

Difficult texts: Exodus 3:14 — The name of God.

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Abstract

God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, as ‘I AM WHO I AM’. However, this verse presents significant difficulties in translation and understanding, which this article explores using the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur.

Keywords

hermeneutical arc, I AM, name of God, Ricoeur, Yahweh

Throughout the Hebrew scripture, the God of Israel has a name. Just as the Greeks had Zeus and the Egyptians had Ra, the Hebrew God — and only true God, in their view — was called YHWH, or Yahweh (‘LORD’ in the English Old Testament).¹ This name was divinely revealed in Exodus 3, and is widely held to be derived from verse 14, when God says *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh* — ‘I am who I am’. Jesus was almost certainly making a divine claim based on this name through his ‘I am’ sayings in John’s gospel.²

The text in Exodus 3:14 is not straightforward, however, and the plain translation masks the complexity of it. To use the language of Paul Ricoeur, it is a naïve understanding. Ricoeur was a French philosopher whom Thiselton³ described as ‘one of the two most significant theorists of hermeneutics of the twentieth century.’ Ricoeur described an interpretative framework which moves along a ‘hermeneutical arc’⁴ from an implicit first naïvete, through a hermeneutics of suspicion, before reaching a second naïvete, where the text interprets us in some sense.

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As we become ‘suspicious’ of Exodus 3:14, then, we see that is a difficult text to translate and interpret on a variety of fronts.⁵ Firstly, it is strangely dissimilar to other texts concerning the name of God in the Old Testament. When Yahweh is used elsewhere of the Old Testament it is in the form ‘I Yahweh’ — the ‘is’ (or ‘am’) is missing, for instance in Exodus 20 or Leviticus 18 — ‘I [am] the LORD your God’. The presence of an additional *’ehyeh* in Exodus 3 means we cannot directly compare this verse with the other formulae in the Old Testament. It also breaks with the framework of a call narrative (which it otherwise occurs within).

Secondly, the text has gone through a journey of translation (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Scholasticism), such that our reception of the text is deeply shaped by translation and philosophy before we even begin. The Hebrew *’ehyeh ’aşer ’ehyeh* becomes Greek *ego eimi ho ōn* in LXX, and then becomes Latin *sum qui sum* (i.e. the verb *esse*). Thus the Hebrew root *hyh* becomes linked to the Greek *einai* and Latin *esse*, verbs of ‘being’ which carry in turn the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

Finally, the Hebrew itself has grammatical perplexities which create difficulties for the translator. The three different uses of the verb *’ehyeh* are enigmatic — ‘I am (state of being?) who I am (name?) . . . say: I am (first person noun?) has sent you’. Ricoeur memorably observes that ‘it is at this point the translator hits a wall.’⁶

The above factors combine to form what Ricoeur describes as ‘an exceptional hermeneutical situation’,⁷ namely how do we interpret the verb *’ehyeh*? The fundamental choice lies between whether this is an ontological statement or not — that is to say, is it saying something about the nature of God? Augustine thought so, perhaps influenced by the LXX translation and Greek philosophy. Thus God *is* and therefore He is also immutable: ‘I am the one who is.’ Pseudo-Dionysius, on the other hand, interpreted it apophatically, where the ‘name’, at least as expressed in Latin, is a name for ‘ignorance, for unknowing’.⁸ These two notions end up fusing, and Aquinas brings us to the stage of *qui est* as the actual *name* of God. God’s name is Being, perhaps even the very same Being of Parmenides. Post-Nietzsche, ‘God is dead’, a new, more Judaic thinking has arisen around God being Love; and Love does not need a being, or an ontology — ‘[Love] has no need to pass through a proposition.’⁹ Ricoeur seems to ultimately favour Gese’s translation of Exodus 3:14 ‘I shall show myself, in that I shall show myself, as the one who will show himself.’¹⁰

In the light of our suspicious analysis, we can return to a naïve reading — the second naïvete — but without the deficiencies of the first naïvete. ‘I am who I am’. We now understand there is something complex and mystical about this verse. To use it to attribute God with an ontology (i.e. ‘God *is*’) ironically brings with it limits on who or what God is. On the other hand, neither is God entirely unknown, in that God has divinely revealed his Name. Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that the Name of God is beyond translation. Instead of understanding, we find holy ground. God has a Name, and that Name is that of a God who reveals.

Notes

1. 'Yahweh' was not spoken out loud, out of respect for the third commandment. Instead 'adonai' (lord) was said, which gives rise to the convention of using 'LORD' in print.
2. David M. Ball, *I Am' in John's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1996).
3. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), p. 228.
4. Dan R. Stiver *Ricoeur and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
5. The analysis presented here draws throughout on Ricoeur's work 'From Interpretation to Translation', in: André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically. Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) tr. David Pallauer, pp. 331–361.
6. Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 334
7. Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 337
8. Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 347
9. Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 358
10. Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. 361

Author biography

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