

Commentary on Exodus 3



Tetragrammaton: Greek for ‘four letters’, that is the sacred Hebrew name for God, the consonants YHWH (Exod. 3: 15); but because it was considered too holy to pronounce, *Adonai* (‘Lord’) was substituted by readers of the text. When the vowels of Adonai were inserted into YHWH the artificial name Jehovah was produced and established for generations by the AV. English translations (except NJB) adopt the convention LORD for the Hebrew Yahweh. (*Elohim* is rendered ‘God’.)ⁱ

Discussion from Patricia Bleicher: *Hayah* is the Hebrew verb "to be" and here it is in the Causative form, masculine third person singular. Thus Yahweh, often translated as if it were in the Qal form "*He Be Who He Be*" (or *I Am Who I Am*), is actually *WHO CAUSES TO BE* which completely agrees with our received theology of a Creator God. One learns these things from the great Harvard linguist-theologian Brevard Childs, who first taught us we had the verb form wrong. If it were the Qal form, it should read Yihwöh, but it has always been transmitted as Yahweh, and therefore should be Causative. Childs states that we can look at this word linguistically, and come out theologically.

Translations: *I Am That I Am, I Am Who I Am, I Will Be What I Will Be, I Am He Who Is*

YHWH		
EHYEH	ASHER	EHYEH
I (Be)	Who	I (Be)
Am	What	Am
Was	Which	Was
Will Be	That	Will Be
Cause to Be		Cause to Be
Caused to Be		Caused to Be
Will Cause to Be		Will Cause to Be

Rabbinic tradition has said that God chose Hebrew so that God cannot be pinned down.

More from Brevard Childs: The literary and form-critical analysis confirmed the scholarly opinion that vv. 13ff reflect the special tradition of one early witness which connected the communication of the divine name to Moses’ commission.

God first directs an answer to Moses which is explicitly distinguished from the answer intended for the people in response to their hypothetical question. The answer addresses itself to the question of God's intention. God says to Moses, 'I will be who I will be.' The word-play on the name of God (ehyeh-yahweh) confirms the connection between name and significance. The formula is paradoxically both an answer and a refusal of an answer. The tenses of the formula indicate that more than a senseless tautology is intended, as if to say, I am who I am, a self-contained, incomprehensible being. Moses is not simply refuted. Rather God announces that his intentions will be revealed in his future acts, which he now refuses to explain. The paronomastic formula, which gives the answer its indefinite quality, also testifies that the reality of God will not be different from that made known in his revelation.

God's answer began with Moses. It now draws on the theological implications for the revelation far beyond the immediate concern of Moses' original question. God has revealed himself to Moses in his eternal name. This is the name which will then be cultically remembered by his people throughout the generations. The revelation of the name in Israel is not to satisfy curiosity, but to be the medium of continuous worship.ⁱⁱ

"...the formula is not simply an expression of indefiniteness, but emphasizes the actuality of God: '*I am who I am*' means: '*I am there, wherever it may be...I am really there!*'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Theological Reflection from Brevard Childs^{iv}: Both testaments are forced to speak of God in terms of his activity which encompasses both the past, the present, and the future. It is not an unknown God who encounters Moses, but the covenant God who has long since spoken to the Patriarchs. Even the name Yaweh points to the future orientation of God's relationship with his people. Who he is and what he does will emerge in the history which yet lies ahead. Likewise, God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ is eschatological in character and his being spans the gap separating creation from new creation.

In the history of Christian theology most of the major theological problems have entered into the discussion of Exodus 3. In the early and medieval periods the interest focused on the issue of ontology (the study of the nature of existence) and divine reality; in recent years on revelation as history or history as revelation. The amazing fact is how seminal this one passage continues to be for each new generation. It lies in the nature of dogmatic theology to go beyond the biblical witness and to draw out the critical implications of its testimony for the modern church in the language of its culture.

ⁱ Oxford Biblical Studies Online

ⁱⁱ Child, Brevard S. ., The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1974

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid