

God and Being in Exodus 3:13–15

Augustine takes an interpretive cue from the fact that there are multiple answers to Moses' question. These multiple responses impart multiple names: "I Am," "He Who Is," "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." What do these names mean, and how is the reader to understand their relationship to the one God? In other words, how is it proper for God to have multiple names?

See Also: Andrea D. Saner, *"Too Much to Grasp": Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

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"Few verses in the entire Old Testament have evoked such heated controversy and such widely divergent interpretations," Brevard Childs writes of Exod 3:13–15.¹ Reading the passage makes clear why this is the case, as these verses raise several questions. What is the sense of Moses' inquiry? Is he asking for the name of God, or is he asking about its significance? What does the circular phrase "I am who I am" mean? Is it meaningful, or is God evading the question? What is the relationship between this phrase and the name of God, "YHWH" (v. 15)?

In Christian tradition, the divine responses to Moses' question have generated much discussion. Christian commentators throughout history have tended to view the text of Exod 3:14 as suggesting something about the nature of God, who is eternal and unchanging. However,

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 1974), 61.

twentieth-century biblical scholars have opposed these ontological readings, focussing instead on the Hebrew wordplay with the divine name “YHWH.”²

These two interpretive trajectories have developed from different textual traditions. At the risk of oversimplification: the Septuagint Greek version of Exod 3:14 differs from the Hebrew Masoretic Text in three important ways. First, the “I am who I am” or “I will be what I will be”³ of the Hebrew is translated with the Greek equivalent of “I am The One Who Is.”⁴ (Likewise, the “I am” in verse 14b is “The One Who Is” in Greek.) Second, verse 15 in Hebrew supplies the divine name, “YHWH.” The Greek translators render “YHWH” with *kyrios*, “Lord,” following the reverential practice of speaking this title in place of pronouncing the divine name. Third, in Hebrew, the divine name forms a wordplay with the significant term of verse 14; the word for “I am,” *'ehyeh*, is similar to “YHWH.” This wordplay is missing in Greek, as the Greek text contains neither *'ehyeh* nor the Tetragram. Therefore, whereas the Hebrew text contains a wordplay and possibly an etymology of the divine name, “YHWH,” the Greek text contains an ontological statement about the nature of God, “I am The One Who Is.”

Gerhard von Rad’s assessment has been characteristic and influential within Old Testament scholarship. He argues that caution is required in identifying Exod 3:14–15 as providing a “definition” of the divine name:

for nothing is farther from what is envisaged in this etymology of the name of Jahweh than a definition of his nature in the sense of a philosophical statement about his being

2. While there is much wisdom in Jewish commentary on this text and Christians past and present have learned, and should continue to learn, from Jewish readings, my focus in this essay is on the place of this passage within Christian tradition.

3. There is considerable literature on whether the present or future tense best renders the Hebrew phrase in English. However, for the purposes of this essay, I follow the NRSV in acknowledging both options.

4. NETS.

(LXX Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν)—a suggestion, for example, of his absoluteness, aseity, etc. Such a thing would be altogether out of keeping with the Old Testament. The whole narrative context leads right away to the expectation that Jahweh intends to impart something—but this is not what he is, but what he will show himself to be to Israel.⁵

Von Rad argues that the Hebrew text of Exod 3:14–15 consists of an etymology of the divine name “YHWH,” and that the Septuagint’s “philosophical statement about his being” mistranslates and misinterprets the Hebrew. He supports the latter point by stating that the Septuagint leads in a direction that is “altogether out of keeping with the [Hebrew] Old Testament.” Is von Rad right that the interpretive tradition stemming from the Septuagint is fundamentally at odds with the Hebrew text? I contend that this way of framing possibilities for interpreting Exod 3:14–15 overstates the distinction between these two interpretive trajectories. Rather, the Hebrew text is open to being read in continuity with the interpretive tradition that has arisen from the Greek text.

Before turning to the Hebrew, I need to say a bit more about interpretations of the Greek text. St. Augustine of Hippo has been a particularly influential exemplar of, and contributor to, this tradition.⁶ Augustine references Exod 3:14 in a wide variety of works, including in sermons on this chapter, his commentaries on the Psalms and the Gospel of John, and his treatise *On the Trinity*. *Sermons* 6 and 7 contain Augustine’s most robust account of Exod 3:14–15 within its narrative context. In both sermons, Augustine interprets these verses according to the movement from God as he is in himself—incomprehensible to the human mind—to God as he is for us.⁷

5. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1966), 180.

6. Augustine is reading an Old Latin version of the Old Testament, which is a Latin translation from the Greek, rather than Jerome’s Vulgate, which was translated from Hebrew.

7. On Augustine’s reading of Exod 3:14–15, see also Emilie zum Brunn, *St. Augustine: Being and Nothingness*, trans. Ruth Namad (New York: Paragon House, 1988) and Michael Allen, “Exodus 3 After the Hellenization Thesis,” *JTI* 3, no. 2 (2009): 179–96.

Augustine takes an interpretive cue from the fact that there are multiple answers to Moses' question. These multiple responses impart multiple names: "I Am," "He Who Is," "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." What do these names mean, and how is the reader to understand their relationship to the one God? In other words, how is it proper for God to have multiple names?

The present tense verb is key to Augustine's explanation of "I am" and "He who is":

"Is" is a name for the unchanging. Everything that changes ceases to be what it was and begins to be what it was not. "Is" is. True "is," genuine "is," real "is," belongs only to one who does not change. [...] This is no creature—not sky, not earth, not angel, not power, not thrones, not dominions, not authorities.⁸

The names "I am" and "He who is" indicate, to Augustine, that God does not change. It is not that God is static or lifeless in God's unchangingness; in fact, the opposite is true! Because God is unchanging, God is eternally alive. Created beings are mortal; they will die and cease to be, but God will not die. God lives eternally, and the same cannot be said of any creature.

The revelation of the unchanging God is significant for Moses, and Augustine reflects on Moses' experience as he contemplates God's response to his question:

Having properly understood that which is and truly is, and having been struck however fleetingly, as by a flash of lightning, by even the slightest ray of light from the only true being, he sees how far, far below he is, how far, far removed, how ever so widely unlike it he is [...]. So then, when Moses saw that he was far, far from being equal to what was said to him, not to what he was shown,⁹ and practically incapable of attaining it on his own, his desire to see that which is was kindled, and he said to God, whom he was talking to, *Show me yourself* (Ex 33:18).¹⁰

7. *Serm. 7.7*. English translations of *Sermons* are from Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons on the Old Testament*, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA, trans. Edmund Hill, OP, *The Works of Saint Augustine* III/1, edited by Boniface Ramsey, 2nd release, electronic ed (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2001; originally published by New City Press in 50 vols., 1990–).

8. Hill's clarifying footnote reads, "That is, to I AM, not to the burning bush."

9. *Serm. 7.7*.

In this revelation of God, Moses does not acquire a definition of God that nullifies the need for further revelation. Rather, knowing God to be completely other from Moses inspires pursuit of further knowledge. Moreover, the revelation of God as unchanging, as the one who most truly *is*, elicits acknowledgement that Moses cannot comprehend God without divine aid. Augustine writes elsewhere of this “I am who I am” and “He who is”: “You cannot take it in, for this is too much to understand, too much to grasp.”¹¹

The reference to Moses’ request, “Show me yourself” (Exod 33:11) in a sermon on Exodus 3 may surprise the modern reader. The issue is likely not that Augustine confuses these narratives that occur early and late in the book, as throughout the sermon, he follows the narrative at hand so closely that he must have the text in front of him. Yet, Augustine views Moses as one who continually seeks knowledge of God, so that this attention to God at the burning bush is akin to his attention to God at Sinai later in the book.

“I am” and “He who is” are not the only names given in Exodus 3. Another name is given in verse 15:

How is it that there I am called this name that shows *I am*, and lo and behold here is another name: *I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*? It means that while God is indeed unchangeable, he has done everything out of mercy, and so the Son of God himself was prepared to take on changeable flesh and thereby to come to man’s rescue while remaining what he is as the Word of God. Thus he who is, clothed himself with mortal flesh, so that it could truly be said, *I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*.¹²

Whereas “I am” and “He who is” are unreachable, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” is comprehensible to the human intellect. God, in mercy, desires to reveal himself in ways that humans can understand, and so identifies himself as the God of the ancestors of Israel. In Augustine’s view, the shape of God’s revelation in Exod 3:14–15 is Christological. Just as the Son humbled himself in becoming human, so God descends to make

10. *Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5. English translation is from Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions of the Psalms 121–150*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB, *The Works of Saint Augustine* III/20, electronic ed.

11. *Serm.* 6.5.

himself known to the Israelites in a way that they can comprehend. “That name in himself, this one for us.”¹³ In the end, Augustine encourages his hearers to pursue God in whatever way they are able, and to hold fast to that revelation given for their salvation, as he concludes *Sermon 7*: “If in any way at all we are able to seek God and track down him who is—and indeed he is ensconced *not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:27–28)—let us then praise, though we cannot find words for it, his being and love his mercy. Amen.”¹⁴

Thus, for Augustine, “I am” and “He who is” suggest the unchangeability and eternity of the Creator God, who is unlike created beings and not entirely comprehensible to humans. However, human inability to understand God fully does not lead the person of faith to despair but to further pursuit of God. In this pursuit, the person of faith is successful, because God mercifully gives himself to be known in ways that humans can grasp. Within Exod 3:14–15 on Augustine’s reading, this graspable name is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

From this discussion, it should be clear that if Augustine does not view Exod 3:14 as offering a definition of God’s nature. Rather, “I am” and “He who is” point to God who is undefinable. God is both truly known and never fully grasped in his revelation, which invites further prayer and reflection. The question remains to what extent the Hebrew text is open to the kind of reading that Augustine offers. Does the Hebrew text demand to be read in an altogether different manner than the way in which Augustine discusses the passage?

When comparing Augustine’s reading of the Greek text to the Hebrew text, a first thing to note is that, in their narrative context, these verses appear to be highly significant theologically. The larger passage, Exod 3:1–4:17, foreshadows the giving of the *torah* at Sinai—the gift on which the rest of the Old Testament hinges—in multiple respects. The call of Moses takes place at the “mountain of God,” called “Horeb,” which is another name for Sinai (v. 1). While there is some debate about to what the “sign” in verse 12 refers, it seems to have something to do with the Sinai covenant (“you shall worship God on this mountain”). At Sinai, the name of God is integral

12. *Serm. 7.7.*

13. *Serm. 7.7.*

to the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2, 5, 7) and to God's revelation of mercy to Moses after the golden calf incident (Exod 33:19; 34:5–6). Fire (v. 2) also accompanies the presence of God later in Exodus (13:21–22; 14:24; esp. 19:18 and 24:17). Moreover, the enigmatic nature of the burning, but unconsumed, bush, heightens the reader's attention. Of Moses' four questions/rebuttals to his call, both the question in verse 13 and the three-fold divine response are the least perspicuous. All of these points merit further exploration, but we can already see that if reading Exod 3:13–15 with Augustine requires that the reader treat this passage with heightened theological sensitivity, the narrative context suggests that such an approach may be warranted.

To Augustine, the names "I am who I am" and "He who is" suggest that God is eternal and unchanging. Though the Hebrew verbal form does not specify present time as the Greek does, the Hebrew phrase in verse 14a does express continuing existence. Given the heightened theological significance of these verses, the phrase could be read as suggesting the constancy and eternity of God. That is, "I am" appears to be central to God's identity, whereas for creatures, such a statement would only be true in a limited sense. While Augustine is not reading the Hebrew text, the Hebrew does not contradict his interpretation at this point.

Further, the incomprehensibility and undefinability of God may be expressed in the Hebrew phrase, "I am who I am." The first "I am" specifies the subject and links to the predicate with the relative pronoun rendered "who," "that," or "what." What makes the phrase enigmatic is what follows the relative pronoun. One expects the predicate to specify something about the subject, but in this case, it does not. By repeating the "I am" of the subject, the predicate forces attention back to the subject and renders the entire phrase circular. Syntactically, this phrase is an *idem per idem* statement, which is used when the author is either unable or unwilling to be more specific.¹⁵ It may seem that God is evading the question, not giving Moses a name at all. But then God gives the divine name in verse 15: "the LORD [YHWH] God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and

14. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1918), 362–63; cf. S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1913), 185–86. Cf. Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd rev. ed., SubBi 27 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), §158o, and Exod 16:23; 33:19.

the God of Jacob.” So the point of God’s response in verse 14a must be something other than evasion.

Together with verse 15, verse 14 seems to offer a qualification of the divine name. Between Moses’ question and the giving of the name “YHWH” is “I am who I am,” which, in the abbreviated form “I am,” is to be shared with the Israelites. The God of Moses is YHWH; this is the name that God has given the people to call upon him. But even as God gives himself to be known by the Israelites under this name, God remains free to determine who or what God will be: “I am who I am.” This statement makes clear to Moses and the Israelites that even though God, in God’s mercy, gives the people a name by which to address God, they cannot fully comprehend or anticipate who or what God will be. God will be who God will be, beyond human knowledge and power. Yet, happily for the Israelites (and for us!), God has chosen to be in relationship with God’s people, to make himself known to humanity in ways that they can grasp. “I am who I am” functions as a qualification to the divine name “YHWH,” as is appropriate for the name of the one Creator God.

Thus, the Hebrew text of Exod 3:14–15 is open to the interpretation that God is eternally and consistently; that God is unlike created things in that God is ultimately free to determine who God will be; and that, in the midst of God’s power as Creator, God mercifully gives himself to be known by his people. These are the main contours of Augustine’s reading of the passage, though he has in hand an Old Latin Old Testament, translated from Greek. To be sure, there are differences between the Greek and Hebrew texts of Exod 3:14–15, but these differences should not be overstated. The Hebrew text, like its Greek counterpart, is open to being read as suggestive of the uncreated nature of the one God.