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Myles M. Bourke

YAHWEH, THE DIVINE NAME

WHEN the time had come for God to free the children of Israel from their captivity in Egypt and give them as their inheritance the land where they were to work out their unique and marvelous destiny, He chose as the agent of His will Moses, son of Levi, whom the liturgy of the patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem calls *magnus ille dux*, "that great leader." Years before, he had escaped from Egypt and was living in the land of Madian, in the service of Jethro the priest, whose daughter he had married. He may well have thought his fortunes forever separated from those of his people and, knowing their hard lot in Egypt, would not have demurred.

THE BURNING BUSH

ONE day, while leading Jethro's flocks, he came to Mount Horeb and saw there a bush afire, yet not consumed by the flames. When he approached this extraordinary sight, God's voice out of the burning bush told him that He had chosen him and no other to lead Israel out of Egypt, into a land flowing with milk and honey (see Ex 3:8). For such had been God's promise to Abraham: "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12:7).

How often those who have been chosen by God for great undertakings are terrified at the prospect and seek excuse! Moses at once objected: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11). God's answer should have filled him with confidence: "I will be with you" (Ex 3:12). But his trust in God had not yet grown strong enough that he would want to carry out so difficult a task, even though assured of God's presence. In spite of this assurance, he shrank from the mission and again objected: "When I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers

has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is His name?' what am I to tell them?" (Ex 3:13).

MOSES' QUESTION

To the Western mind, the question Moses asked God seems pointless. Why should the Hebrews, who knew the God of their fathers and His power, at the solemn moment when their deliverance from tyranny was promised, concern themselves with apparently so trivial a matter as His proper name?

The most obvious reply might seem that the Hebrews in Egypt did not know which of the many gods they had accepted from their pagan masters was the God of their fathers; that they wanted to learn His name in order to identify Him among the many gods they knew.¹ There is no doubt, of course, that the Hebrews had fallen into idolatry during their years of bondage (see Jos 24:14; Ez 23). But is it reasonable to suppose that they had so far forgotten the traditions of the patriarchs that they believed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be one of the gods of Egypt? This seems improbable in the extreme.

Another answer sometimes given is that what appears trivial to Western man today was by no means so to the ancient Hebrew. For him, a name was no arbitrarily chosen designation; on the contrary, it expressed the nature, or at least some notable characteristic, of him who bore it. Thus, Man was called *Adam*, because he was formed from the dust of the ground, *adamah* (Gen 2:7), and Woman *Ishah*, because she was formed from the body of man, *ish* (Gen 2:23). The child of the first human pair was called Cain, because his mother made, *kanah*, him with the help of the Lord (Gen 4:1). After the murder of Abel, Eve bore another son, whom she named Seth, for God gave, *shath*, her another child in place of Abel (Gen 4:25). Moses was given his name by the Egyptian princess who drew him out of the waters of the Nile, for "to draw," or "to pull out," is in Hebrew *mashah* (Ex 2:10). Needless to say, these explanations are not scientific but popular etymologies, based merely on similarities of

1. See Gottfried Quell, "Kyrios," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, III, 1071-1072. Quell inclines to this view, while admitting that it is doubtful.

sound. But they do show that the Hebrew looked upon a name as a means of insight into the nature of the person who bore it.

True though this is, it is hardly pertinent to our problem. Can one imagine that at a time when deliverance seemed at hand the Hebrews would have inquired after the nature of the God of their fathers? On the contrary, it is hard to think of any point in their history when they would have been less likely to do so. He who offered them freedom had identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 3:6); that was quite enough to enable them both to know who He was and to recall the ancient promise He had made to their fathers. To suppose that in such crucial circumstances they would have asked for His proper name, and thus for insight into His nature, seems unlikely.

But if they believed that knowledge of a person's name gave not only insight into his nature but power over him, then the reason for their inquiry becomes clear. This was precisely a belief among the Egyptians: When the name of a god was known, man had power over him, the power of efficacious invocation, magical in its effect. This power, however, resided only in the knowledge of his hidden, "essential" name, not of every name which might be applied to him; hence the importance of knowing the secret name of a god. Evidence of this belief among the Egyptians is found in an interesting text of the Nineteenth Dynasty (1310-1200 B.C.) which recounts the myth of how the goddess Isis learned the name of the supreme god, Re.² That

2. See "The God and His Unknown Name of Power," *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 12-14. In summary, the myth tells of Isis' making a venomous snake and putting it in the path of Re, so that it might bite him. She knows that the one who pronounces the secret name of the god will be able to cast out the poison, and she believes that, in order to be cured, Re will reveal the secret name. As Re lies in agony from the poison, he says: "My father and my mother told me my name, (but) it was hidden in my body before I was born, in order that the power of a male or female magician might not be made to play against me." Isis appears and asks that Re reveal his name to her, in order that by using it in a magical spell she may cast out the poison. Re then gives a series of his titles: "I am he who made heaven and earth, who knotted together the mountains, and created what is thereon. I am he who made the waters. . . . I am he who made the heaven and the mysteries of the two horizons, so that the soul of the gods might be placed therein. I am he who opened his eyes, so that light might come into being, who closed his eyes, so that darkness might come into being. . . . I am he who made the hours, so that days might come into being. . . . I am he who made the living fire. . . . I am Khepri in the morning, Re at noon, and Atum who is in the evening." None of these, however, is the proper name which

the Israelites in Egypt, affected as they were by their pagan environment, shared this superstitious belief is more than likely (Jos 24:14; Ez 23). If we assume, then, that they thought the knowledge of the secret name of a god gave the power of efficacious invocation, it is easy to understand why they would have wanted to know the name of the God of their fathers at this critical time. It would guarantee to them that His newly shown favor would never change; it would assure them of His constant protection; it would, in a sense, put Him in their power.³

GOD'S ANSWER

God replied, *Eheyeh asher eheyeh*, "I am who [I] am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: *Eheyeh*, I am, sent me

Isis wishes to know: "Thy name is not really among these which thou hast told me. If thou tellest it to me, the poison will come forth, for a person whose name is pronounced lives." Then Re, with great reluctance, and only after having warned Isis to reveal it to no one except the god Horus, tells his secret name. "The great god divulged his name to Isis, the Great of Magic." The text simply states that the name was revealed, but does not state what it was. Upon learning it, Isis commands the poison: "Flow forth, scorpion poison! Come forth from Re, O Eye of Horus! Come forth from the burning god at my spell! . . . Come upon the ground, O mighty poison! Behold, the great god has divulged his name, and Re is living, the poison is dead." The text ends with a reference to "Isis the Great, the Mistress of the Gods, who knows Re (by) his own name."

3. Any discussion of the meaning of Moses' question must include the much-disputed point whether the name of Yahweh (or at least some form of that name, such as Yahu or Yah) was known in Israel before God spoke to Moses on Horeb. Up to now, it has not been proved that the name is derived from any non-Israelite prototype. See William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (2nd ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1946), p. 197; Roland de Vaux, "La Religion de l'Ancien Testament," *Initiation Biblique* (3rd ed.; Tournai: Desclée, 1954), p. 892; P. van Imschoot, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament* (Tournai: Desclée, 1954), I, 20; Quell, *op. cit.*, pp. 1064-1065. On the other hand, that the name, in some form, was known before the time of Moses to at least some Israelites is accepted by many: Van Imschoot, *op. cit.*, p. 18; A. M. Dubarle, "La Signification du Nom de Iahweh," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, XXXV (1951), 3; A. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1904), p. 45; Isidore Epstein, *The Faith of Judaism* (London: Soncino, 1954), p. 162, n. 21; Gustave Lambert, "Que signifie le nom divin YHWH?" *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, LXXIV (1952), 907; Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P., "El et Jahvé," *Revue Biblique*, XII (1903), 386; Ladislaus v. Pákozdy, "Die Deutung des YHWH-Namens in Exodus 3:14," *Judaica*, XI (1955), 206; Martin Buber und Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936), p. 193. Those who hold this view cannot, of course, suppose that Moses was asking for the name, since he already knew it; rather do they think he was asking for its meaning. Since the wish to know the meaning of a name would hardly differ from the wish to know the secret name which gives power to the one who knows it, the reason for Moses' question would be the same in either case.

to you." God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations."

(Ex 3:14-15)⁴

It was in the name of Yahweh that Moses accomplished his mission, in the name of Yahweh that he led the people of Israel out of Egypt. From that time, this was God's name among them: "I am Yahweh, your God from the land of Egypt" (Os 12:9; 13:4), the name that was to evoke for future generations the memory of the great deliverance: "Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 20:2).

THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NAME

IT HAS already been pointed out that the biblical explanations of names are not scientific but popular etymologies. Therefore, to know the real etymology of the name Yahweh is of less importance than to know its meaning for the biblical writer. In Ex 3:14, the name is explained in terms of the Hebrew verb *h y h*, "to be," of which the older form, *h w h*, appears in the name Yahweh itself (see Ex 3:15).⁵ Yahweh is the name of Him who, when asked for His name, answered: *Eheyeh asher eheyeh*, "I am who I am," and instructed Moses to say to the Israelites: "*Eheyeh*, I am, sent me to you." In speaking of Him, however, the Hebrews would not use the first person of the verb but the third: *Yahweh*, He is.

4. The three cycles of tradition found in the Pentateuch, exclusive of Deuteronomy, differ in their use of the name Yahweh for the God of Israel. In the Yahwistic tradition, that name is used from the beginning; it is expressly stated, moreover, that at the time of Enosh, the son of Seth, men "began to call on the name of Yahweh" (Gen 4:26). The Elohist tradition and the Priestly tradition, on the other hand, attribute the name to the revelation made to Moses (see Ex 3:14-15; 6:2-3). Whatever may be said about the antiquity of the name, the statements of Exodus make difficult the supposition that the name was known to the Israelites in general before that revelation. The fact that the Yahwistic tradition uses it from the beginning may be explained as anticipation: Those among whom this tradition was formed knew that Yahweh was the name of the God of Israel, and because the time of its becoming generally accepted as His name did not interest them, they used it even in their account of the time before Moses. The statement in Gen 4:26 seems to emphasize not the name, but the cult of Yahweh.

5. So, too, in the name Eve; she is called *Hawab* because she is the mother of all the living, *hay* (Gen 3:20).

Although William F. Albright thinks that Yahweh is the causative form of the verb, and that of the many meanings which have been attributed to it only one "yields any suitable sense: 'He causes to be,'" ⁶ many scholars consider it the third singular imperfect of the *kal*, or simple conjugation: "He is." Without entering here into the difficult question of the meaning of the Hebrew tenses, it may be pointed out that the Hebrew imperfect is used to denote an action or a state regarded by the speaker as not completed, or continuing; the time may be past, present, or future. Consequently, the imperfect may be translated as future tense, and there are those who think that *Eheyeh asher eheyeh* should so be translated.⁷ Yet, notwithstanding a statement like that of A. Davidson that "the imperfect of such a stative verb as *h y h* must be taken in the sense of a future," and that "there is in the Hebrew Bible [no] case of the imperfect of this verb having the sense of the English present," ⁸ a great number of scholars seem quite satisfied to translate it in the present tense. For our purposes, we may continue to regard the present-tense translation as quite acceptable, and with added security, since it has recently been proposed by the distinguished Orientalist Edouard Dhorme.⁹

Both *Eheyeh*, "I am," and *Yahweh*, "He is," are abbreviations of *Eheyeh asher eheyeh*, "I am who I am," serving to call to mind the full statement. In this they are like many other biblical names, as A. M. Dubarle has pointed out.¹⁰ Albright gives a number of interesting analogies to this practice of abbreviation in non-Israelite sources.¹¹

THE INFINITE

In his *L'Esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale*, Etienne Gilson, speaking of the influence on Christian philosophy of Ex 3:14, calls the name of God given in that text "the cornerstone of all Christian philosophy."

6. Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

7. See Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 46; Pákozdy, *loc. cit.*, pp. 197-198; Martin Buber, *Königtum Gottes* (2nd ed.; Berlin: Schocken, 1936), p. 84; Michel Allard, "Note sur la Formule 'Ehyeh asher Ehyeh,'" *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, XLV (1957), 79-86.

8. Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

9. See Edouard Dhorme, "Le nom du Dieu d'Israël," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, CXXI (1952), 5-18.

10. See Dubarle, *loc. cit.*, p. 6.

11. See Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

In order to know what God is, Moses appeals to God Himself. He asks His name, and straightway comes the answer. . . . No hint of metaphysics, but God speaks, the matter is settled, and Exodus lays down the principle from which henceforth the whole of Christian philosophy will be suspended. From this moment it is understood once and for all that the proper name of God is Being and that, according to the word of St. Ephrem, taken up later by St. Bonaventure, this name denotes His very essence. Now to say that the word *being* designates the essence of God, and the essence of no other being but God, is to say that in God essence and existence are identical, and that in God alone essence and existence are identical. That is why St. Thomas Aquinas, referring expressly to this text of Exodus, will declare that among all the divine names there is one that is eminently proper to God, namely, "He who is," precisely because this "He who is" signifies nothing other than being itself. . . . In this principle lies an inexhaustible metaphysical fecundity. . . . There is but one God and this God is Being, that is the cornerstone of all Christian philosophy, and it was not Plato, it was not even Aristotle, it was Moses who put it in position.¹²

Gilson's interpretation of the meaning of the name is doubtless that of the majority of Catholic theologians and philosophers, that is, of those in the scholastic tradition. Broad though that tradition is, on this point there is little disagreement. Nor is this a matter on which, in the past, many Catholic scripture scholars found it necessary to differ from dogmatic theologians. In fact, this interpretation was so commonly held that F. Ceuppens, one of the few Catholics who have attempted the writing of a "biblical theology," ¹³ felt justified in defending it as the opinion "we share with Catholic authors." Those who disagreed—because they thought the notion of a subsistent being, a being which exists of itself, too abstract to be a Hebrew concept—he characterized as "non-Catholic authors."¹⁴ For Ceuppens, then, the lines would appear to be well drawn, with Catholics and "subsistent being"

12. Etienne Gilson, *L'Esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale* (2nd ed.; Paris: Vrin, 1948), pp. 50-51.

13. F. Ceuppens, *Theologia Biblica*, I (Rome: Collegio "Angelicum," 1938). In spite of the title, the work is an exegesis of scriptural texts used in treatises of dogmatic theology rather than a "biblical theology." For an excellent treatment of the latter, see Roderick A. F. MacKenzie, "The Concept of Biblical Theology," *The Catholic Theological Society of America—Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Convention* (1955), pp. 48-66.

14. Ceuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

on the one side and non-Catholics and "less abstract notions" on the other.

But Ceuppens could not have intended his words to be taken quite so definitely, since the interpretation of the name Yahweh as an expression of absolute being was also that of the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides.¹⁵ Likewise Moses Mendelssohn, the first Jewish scholar to translate the Bible into German, rendered Yahweh as *Der Ewige*, "The Eternal One." In his opinion, no other rendering could better express the three ideas: eternity, providence, and subsistent being, which he thought contained in the name.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is now among Catholic exegetes a trend away from the interpretation proposed by Ceuppens as *the* Catholic one. However much they may differ in their interpretation of the name, they agree that it does not express the indubitable fact that in God essence and existence are identical. They are convinced that the divine answer to Moses is far from showing that "the proper name of God is Being"; indeed, as they hold, the ideas "subsistent being" and "aseity"—the truth that God is altogether uncaused and eternally independent, that He has not *become*, but *is*—are not contained, even in a rudimentary way, in the name Yahweh, or in the divine utterance "I am who I am," of which Yahweh is a slightly changed abbreviation.¹⁷

A few years ago, Peter Munz asserted that the explanation of the name Yahweh as an expression of the fact that God is the being in whom essence and existence are identical is due to "a constantly repeated mistranslation and misinterpretation of the original Hebrew text."¹⁸ According to Munz, the "mistranslation" was the work of the Septuagint translator, who rendered *Eheyeh asher eheyeh*, "I am who I am," as *Egō eimi ho ōn*, "I am He who is," or, as Munz renders the Greek, "I am Being." This translation, he thinks, was due to the "reception of Platonism in Jewish circles," more specifically, to the introduction of the Platonic concept of true being into Jewish thought. For many Jews, that concept was "a valid and genuine description of their experience of God"; hence the translation of Ex 3:14

as an expression of that concept. God's answer to Moses was regarded as a revelation of His nature; He gave Himself the name which expresses that nature as perfectly as it can be expressed in human speech. So powerful was the influence of this "mistranslation" that the misinterpretation of the text was by no means confined to thinkers of the Platonic tradition; the scholastics, and pre-eminently St. Thomas Aquinas, regarded the text as an expression, in philosophical terms, of the essence of God.

That the views of the Septuagint translator were those which Munz attributes to him is at least doubtful; it is not certain that by his "I am He who is" he meant "I am Being." Possibly, he understood God's words to mean that He is the One who really exists, while the false gods are "nothing" (Is 41:29; 45:5-6).¹⁹ But it is undeniable that the Septuagint translation of Ex 3:14 was interpreted by some Fathers of the Church in a "philosophical sense,"²⁰ undeniable also that it lends itself most readily to such an interpretation.²¹ St. Jerome, for instance, whose rendering *Ego sum qui sum*, "I am who am," differs slightly from that of the Septuagint, explicitly sees it as an expression of God's subsistent being:

The Lord says, "I am who am" and "He who is has sent me to you." . . . Other beings owe their existence to God's generosity; but God, who always is, who does not receive His being from anything outside Himself, who is the source of His own being, the sufficient cause of His own substance, cannot be thought to have received His being from a source different from Himself.²²

19. See B. Couroyer, *L'Exode* (Paris: Cerf, 1952), p. 34.

20. St. Gregory Nazianzen refers the text to God's subsistent being, *Oratio Theologica*, IV, 18 (PG 36:125, 128), and again to His subsistent being and His eternity, *Oratio*, XLV, 3 (PG 36:625); St. Gregory of Nyssa, to His eternity, *Contra Eunomium*, VIII (PG 45:768-769). Among the Latin Fathers, St. Hilary cites the text when treating of God's eternity, *De Trinitate*, I, 5 (PL 10:28); so, too, St. Ambrose, *In Psalmum XLIII Enarratio*, 19 (PL 14:1100). For St. Augustine, the text shows the changelessness of God: *In Psalmum CXXXIV Enarratio* (CCSL 40:1940), *De Trinitate*, VII, 5 (PL 42:942). Certainly the notion that God is eternal and changeless is a thoroughly scriptural one, but the scriptural expressions of it, for instance, "But you are the same, and your years have no end" (Ps 101:28), are quite different from philosophical considerations about the meaning of *to be* when it is applied to God.

21. See Lagrange, *loc. cit.*, p. 380: "The translation of the Septuagint forces the statement slightly. . . ." Van Imschoot is more emphatic; the Septuagint translation "gives the text a philosophical nuance which is foreign to the Hebrew words and obscures the principal idea . . ." (*op. cit.*, p. 16, n. 8).

22. *Commentariorum in Epistolam ad Ephesios Liber*, II, III (PL 26:488-489).

15. See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlaender (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), I, 63, p. 239.

16. See Buber und Rosenzweig, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-191.

17. For these scholars the question is, evidently, not whether the concept is valid, but whether it is expressed in the texts of Exodus.

18. Peter Munz, "Sum Qui Sum," *Hibbert Journal*, L (1952), 149.

Here, St. Jerome is the spokesman of a long tradition. One does not lightly dismiss such a tradition, fostered and followed by writers of extremely varied attitudes and backgrounds, as nothing but the result of misinterpretation. Yet, what Munz claims is merely a sharp formulation of what many exegetes of today hold.

With full awareness that grouping scholars into classes inevitably sacrifices nuances of their thought, one may yet distinguish two groups, both opposed to the view that the name Yahweh tells something about God as He is in Himself, whether that be His subsistent being, His eternity, or His changelessness. The one holds that the name does have positive content, that it does give insight into what God is; not, however, into what He is in Himself, but rather into what He is to His people. To this first group, God's answer to Moses expresses something historical and concrete rather than philosophical and abstract: that He will always be present to His people, that He manifests His existence by mighty acts in their behalf. It thus bespeaks His protection of them—His providence. The other group maintains that the name gives no positive insight into what God is; that Yahweh can be understood only in terms of the complete formula "I am who I am," of which it is an abbreviation, and that these words denote the refusal of the God of the fathers to reveal His name.

THE EVER-PRESENT

The view that God's answer to Moses shows Him to be the ever-present, ever-ready Helper, is by no means the product of recent scholarship. It is found in the Talmud where *Eheyeh asher eheyeh* is seen as God's assurance of His continual presence with Israel, in the Egyptian bondage, and in all the oppressions the people would suffer under hostile rulers of later times.²³ This was also the interpretation of the medieval Jewish scholar Rashi in his commentary on the Pentateuch.²⁴

But modern scholars have gone beyond these comments and, in developing this interpretation, have sought to give it a solid basis, first by considering the verb *h y h* itself. Martin Buber, for example,

23. See Ber. 9b; cf. *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935-48), *Berakoth*, p. 48.

24. See *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Exodus*, trans. M. Rosenbaum and A. Silbermann (London: Shapiro, Vallentine, 1946), pp. 12, 231.

holds that the verb means principally "to become, to happen, to be present, to be here (or there)"; and that while its secondary meaning is "to be" in the copulative sense (that is, merely as the connective between subject and predicate), it never means "to be" in the sense of existence.²⁵ Hence, according to Buber, *Eheyeh asher eheyeh* means: I will be there with you, my people, whatever form my appearance may take.²⁶

Canon van Imschoot rejects the opinion that *h y h* never has the meaning "to be" in the sense of "to exist," but holds that, for the Hebrew, existence is never a static, but a dynamic, concept; "to be" means to manifest one's existence by act. It denotes efficacious, rather than absolute, being.²⁷ Van Imschoot's interpretation of the name Yahweh, then, is not very different from Buber's, although it is based on what seems a more accurate view of the meaning of the verb *h y h*: Yahweh means He who manifests His existence by mighty acts in behalf of His people.²⁸

To Buber, van Imschoot, and others, the context of the divine answer to Moses no less than its content suggests not subsistent being but God's constant providence, His saving action in favor of Israel. It was the name Moses was to announce to the disheartened Israelites, who needed assurance of God's help. As Rosenzweig puts it: "What meaning would a lecture on God's aseity have had for these despondent and unhappy men?"²⁹ Moreover, the name is used in the account of their deliverance and elsewhere in the Bible as pointing to God's mighty protection of His people, to the manifestation of His existence by deeds of power: He will lay His hand on Egypt, and bring the Israelites out of that land by great acts of judgment, so that all Egypt may know that *He is Yahweh* (Ex 7:4-5). When the army of the

25. See Buber, *Königtum Gottes*, p. 84; so, too, Pákozdy, *loc. cit.*, p. 197.

26. See Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

27. See van Imschoot, *op. cit.*, p. 16. For this view of the Old Testament concept of being, see also Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (3rd ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1953), p. 235, n. 36; Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 55; *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, ed. J. Hertz (New York: Metzudah, 1941), I, 215.

28. See van Imschoot, *op. cit.* See also Johannes Schildenberger, "Die Religion des Alten Testaments," in *Christus und die Religionen der Erde*, ed. Franz König (Freiburg: Herder, 1951), III, 472; Th. Vriezen, "'Ehje aser 'ehje," *Festschrift für A. Bertholet* (Tübingen: 1950), pp. 498-512. Vriezen finds a nuance of intensity in the relative clause here, as in Ex 33:19 and Ez 12:25, a view with which Schildenberger agrees (*loc. cit.*, p. 470).

29. Buber und Rosenzweig, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

Pharaoh is destroyed by the waters of the Red Sea, those waters through which Israel has passed safely, the Egyptians will know that *He is Yahweh* (Ex 14:4, 18). Again, we read in the book of Ezekiel, when God executes judgment on the Moabites, in punishment of their misdeeds to Israel, they will know that *He is Yahweh* (25:11); and once Israel is restored, it will build houses, plant vineyards, without fear of its enemies, and it will know that *He is Yahweh* (28:26).

In all these instances, a revelation of God's power, usually in support of His people, but sometimes for its chastisement, makes known who He is: Yahweh. Can it be seriously maintained that this means that Israel (and Egypt and Moab!) must recognize that He is the Being in whom essence and existence are identical? Do not the circumstances in which the words "to know that I am Yahweh" are used rather suggest that the name Yahweh refers to God's actions, to a being dynamic, not static—to the God of Israel in His relationship to His people?³⁰

Further, by revealing His name, God implicitly repudiated the belief that lay behind Moses' question, that the knowledge of the name of

30. Recently, Solomon D. Goitein proposed the view that Yahweh means "the One who loves passionately, and helps those who worship him, while, at the same time, demanding exclusive devotion to himself" ("YHWH The Passionate," *Vetus Testamentum*, VI, 1956, 1-9). His interpretation is based on comparison of the name with the Arabic root *hwy*, the basic meaning of which is "on the one hand, passionate love; on the other, equally passionate self-assertion or devotion to some aim" (p. 3). In many respects, it resembled the Hebrew root *hny* which conveys two meanings: the strength of an emotion and the exclusiveness of its direction. The root *hwy* has almost disappeared from biblical Hebrew, its use being avoided once the name Yahweh had become the name of the God of Israel. The striking parallel between Ex 33:19 (the "essence of which is the authentic interpretation of YHWH's proper name") and Ex 3:14, as well as the situation in which the oraculum of 3:14 was given, leave little doubt as to the real meaning of the latter: "I shall passionately love whom I love." Yahweh is He who loves passionately, and passionately demands exclusive devotion. In substance, Goitein's interpretation seems to be the same as that proposed by W. Gardner: "He loves, the loving God" ("The Name Yahweh," *Expository Times*, XX, 1908-09, 91-92). Since Gardner, in discussing Ex 34:5-7, points out that the jealousy of Yahweh is simply the other side of His love, and that His "jealousy is only the demand that what is due to Love on the part of those loved is given," it is strange to see Goitein write that Gardner interprets the name "too narrowly, in the sense of 'The Lover.'" Goitein adds, however, that he was not able to see Gardner's article himself, which may be the reason why he attributes to Gardner too narrow an interpretation of the name. In reading Goitein's stimulating essay, one cannot help thinking of Albright's statement: "The other suggestions (for the meaning of the name), 'He blows, He fells, He loves, He is kindly,' etc., are totally without parallel in Ancient Near-Eastern onomastics" (*op. cit.*, p. 198).

a god gave power over him, the power of efficacious invocation. Yahweh has no need to conceal His name; His creature, man, has no power over Him, whether he knows His name or not. So understood, the Exodus text is the account of the elimination of magic from faith.³¹

THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Another interpretation of the name Yahweh has recently been presented by the Dominican scholar A. M. Dubarle.³² For him God's answer to Moses is really God's refusal to name Himself. His view cannot be called original, as he readily admits, but his presentation of it is more complete than that of his predecessors. The highest recommendation of Dubarle's exegesis is, perhaps, his method.

One cannot avoid the impression that the exegetes who think the divine name expresses the idea of God's providence, His existence as manifested by His mighty acts, place too much weight on the meaning they suppose the verb *hyh* to have in this passage. There are many possible meanings. *Hyh* can mean "to be present," "to happen," "to exist"—and not only in the sense of manifesting existence by action but, at least sometimes, merely to exist. Indeed, what other meaning but "to exist" is possible for *hyh* in Gen 6:4; Num 9:6; Jg 13:2; 1 Kg 1:1, 9:1? Or *hyh* may simply be the copula, joining subject and predicate. But which of these is its meaning in Ex 3:14? Dubarle suggests that there is little chance of arriving at a satisfactory answer if one does not take into account similar texts elsewhere in the Old Testament. The similarities are of two kinds: syntactical parallels, phrases similar in form to "I am who I am," and parallels of content, passages in which a divine being answers a man who has asked his name.

1. Parallels of Form

The parallels of form referred to by Dubarle are sentences in which the verb of the principal clause has as its complement a relative clause

31. See Buber, *Königtum Gottes*, p. 85.

32. See Dubarle, *loc. cit.*, pp. 3-21. Lambert (*loc. cit.*, pp. 897-915) accepts the interpretation of Dubarle. Joseph Chaine interprets Ex 3:14 in the same way; see *Le Livre de la Genèse* (Paris: Cerf, 1949), p. 347, n. 103.

which repeats the verb, so that the entire phrase consists of the verb, the relative, and the verb repeated. The whole phrase gives no other meaning than that of indetermination. The following examples, chosen from among those cited by Dubarle, will suffice to illustrate his point.

In 1 Kg 23, Saul is told that his enemy David is in the town of Keilah and decides to attempt his capture there. When David hears of this, he inquires of God whether the people of Keilah will deliver him up to Saul; the Lord assures him they will. The Hebrew original goes on to say that David and his men "departed from Keilah, and *went where they went*" (23:13). The text leaves their itinerary entirely vague, so that de Vaux can translate it: ". . . they wandered about at random."³³

In 2 Kg 15:20, King David, on leaving Jerusalem at the time of Absalom's revolt, tries to dissuade Ittai the Gittite from accompanying him on his flight from the city. According to the Hebrew, he urges him: "Shall I cause you to wander with us, *while I go where I go?*" The meaning is that David has no idea of where his flight will take him. Thus the Chicago Bible translates the phrase: "while I go wherever I may," which seems to express the thought exactly.³⁴

In 4 Kg 8:1, Elisha advises the woman whose son he has restored to life to depart from her country because a famine is about to come upon it, which will last for seven years. This is how the Hebrew puts his counsel: "Arise, and depart with your household, and *sojourn where you will sojourn*," that is, "sojourn wherever you can, but do not remain here."

As a final example, we may take a statement in the immediate context of Ex 3:14. God has answered every objection Moses has brought up against his being chosen as Israel's deliverer; still, Moses is reluctant to accept the role, and says (again following the Hebrew): "Pray, Lord, *send by means of him whom you will send*" (Ex 4:13). The meaning is: "Send someone else—anyone else—but not me." Couroyer renders the text: "Excuse me, Lord! Give this mission to whomever you wish."³⁵

From the fact that the answer of God to the question about His

33. Roland de Vaux, *Les Livres de Samuel* (Paris: Cerf, 1953), p. 109.

34. *The Complete Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 296.

35. Couroyer, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

name is given in the form so often attested as the way of expressing indetermination (the examples cited here are by no means all Dubarle offers), he concludes that the name gives no positive insight into what God is. The name is rather a refusal to name Himself: "I am who I am."

But could it not be that the first "I am" is merely the copula, and the second, occurring in the relative clause, is used in one of the other senses which the verb *h y h* can have? Impossible, thinks Dubarle, for this would lead to an "inadmissible ambiguity." Had the sacred writer given a different meaning to the verb in the second instance, he would only have confused the reader. He chose to express the name by means of a construction which is used in Hebrew to denote indetermination; had he wished to express some positive reality about the being of God, he had no need to use the verb *h y h* as a copula at all, for the mere juxtaposition of the personal pronoun and the predicate would have served his purpose. In fact, it is in this way that God names Himself as El Shaddai (Gen 17:1), as the God of Abraham (Gen 26:24; 28:13), as the God who appeared to Jacob at Bethel (Gen 31:13). Since the divine utterance is couched in a phrase which usually expresses indetermination, we must suppose that this is all it was meant to convey.

2. *Parallels of Content*

It is not only in a late stage of its theological development, but early in its history, that Israel became aware of the majesty and awesomeness of God. Thus the cycle of traditions in the Pentateuch which is called the Elohist cycle³⁶—to which Ex 3:14–15 belongs—presents the God of Israel as He whose face man cannot see and still live (Ex 33:20–23).³⁷ This same exalted concept of God is found in a narrative of the Book of Judges, a narrative which is close in form to Ex 3:14. There the Angel of Yahweh (an expression often used in the Old Testament, probably meaning Yahweh Himself in His appearances to men) foretells the birth of Samson to Manoe and his wife. Manoe asks of the Angel: "What is your name, that we may honor you when your

36. See footnote 4.

37. For an interesting discussion of this passage and of its relation to the views of the Yahwistic tradition, see Hugo Gressmann, *Die Anfänge Israels* (2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1922), pp. 68–72.

words come true?" The Angel's answer to this request is: "Why do you ask my name, which is mysterious?" (Jg 13:17-18). Similarly, the patriarch Jacob, when wrestling with the mysterious being whom he later realizes to be God, asks His name, only to have his request refused: "Why do you ask my name?" (Gen 32:30).

The objection has been made that these two texts are by no means parallels of content to Ex 3:14; that they are, in fact, quite the opposite, because in them God refuses to name Himself, while in Exodus he answers Moses' question by giving His name: "I am who I am." From what has been seen of the syntactical parallels to that answer, however, it seems clear that "I am who I am" is no proper name but rather a designation which suggests the "otherness," the majesty, the mysteriousness, of the God of the fathers. It will serve, in the abbreviated form Yahweh, as the name of the God of Israel, but of itself it expresses nothing positive about Him, gives no insight into what He is. For no name can express all that He is; He is beyond naming—"I am who I am."

True, the name Yahweh was for the Israelites of generations to come the name which would evoke the loving thought of God's protection, His providence, His mighty deeds, His constant presence with His people. It carried such meaning for them, not because the name itself contained these ideas, but because this mysterious designation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was associated with His mighty deed *par excellence*, the Exodus: "Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 20:2).

The name, the promise of deliverance, the fulfillment of the promise by prodigies of power which Israel could never forget—these were linked in the traditions of Israel. Hence, when God promised deliverance to the exiles in Babylon, a deliverance presented as a new exodus, He could give them no greater reason for assurance than to recall the ancient deliverance and the name by which they have known Him ever since:

*I, I am Yahweh,
and beside me there is no saviour.
I declared, and I delivered,
and I announced, I, and no strange god among you,
and you are my witnesses.*

(Is 43:11-12)

CONCLUSION

THE particular merit of the last two interpretations of the name Yahweh is that they seek to explain the Bible by the Bible, instead of by philosophical concepts. For such concepts as subsistent being, aseity, identity of essence and existence seem to have formed no part of the Hebrew mind, at least not before the late period when Greek thought influenced the Hebrew.³⁸

Each of these interpretations recognizes the fact that simply because a concept is true, and because a biblical statement is such that it could be used to express that concept, the problem of the meaning of the biblical statement is by no means settled. For the question here is not what the divine utterance could have meant for a person acquainted with Greek philosophy, but what it meant for the biblical writer, and for the people of Israel. With the latter question as a starting point, the answer must be sought first within the limits of Hebrew thought categories, in so far as they can be known from the rest of the Old Testament literature, or from the literatures of related cultures. It must then be sought by consulting the context of the passage in question, and, also, parallel syntactical usage.

If one must judge among the recent attempts to explain the name Yahweh, remaining within the limits of biblical concepts, it seems that the interpretation adopted by Dubarle has the superiority of considering not only all the possible biblical meanings of *h y h* and the context of Ex 3:14, but also the syntactical parallels, which strongly suggest that, linguistically, "I am who I am" is another example of the Hebrew way of expressing indetermination. Theologically, however, "I am who I am" seems to proclaim no less than the great biblical message: Israel's God is a "hidden God" (Is 45:15), incomprehensible, ineffable. It is thus that the anonymous mystic of the fourteenth century could speak of Him as veiled by the "cloud of unknowing," and write: "By love may He be gotten and holden; but by thought never."³⁹

³⁸ See, for example, Wis 13:1. The Book of Wisdom was written about fifty years before Christ.

³⁹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Justin McCann (London: Burns Oates, 1947), p. 13.