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A kernel literal analysis of God's revealed name in Exodus 3:14

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Abstract

There have been various exegetical and hermeneutical interpretations to the meaning of the *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14 yet there has not been a consensus on the matter. Scholars have been grappling with the root word and exact meaning of the revealed name. The writer examined various scholarly perspectives to the name. It was discovered that a setting aside of the word-for-word translation without consideration of the form, grammar and structure resulted in a subtle translation and interpretation that depended more on presuppositions and commitments of the translators than on methodology. The writer through a kernel analysis attempted a re-reading of the Masoretic Text rendition of Exodus 3:14 which gives a clearer insight and understanding of God's revelation to man. "I will be who I will be" reveals God's sovereignty at all times and a call to depend on God.

Introduction

Names are an important reflection of a person's character, nature and identity. They may be conferred based on occurrences before and during pregnancy, and after birth, religious feelings, the status of the family, circumstantial events or wishful projections or expectations over the child. So we can have insight from a human point of view, God's enigmatic answer to Moses' question about his name—Ehyeh asher ehyeh (Exodus 3:14). It is therefore imperative to have a perceived holistic and comprehensive reading of the

expression of God to Moses when he asked God for His name. God in His response to Moses spoke in enigmatic words, for which countless efforts have been made to present the translations and the meaning of these words. “Some due to the inability to properly interpret it have concluded that the words really have no meanings. There has been no consensus as to the meaning of these enigmatic words” (Cronin 2017:1).

God’s enigmatic answer to Moses’s question about his name—*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, is usually translated “I am who I am” (Exod. 3:14). This has provoked philological analysis for centuries, often coupled with high philosophical and theological reflection; yet little attention has been paid to the narrative relevance of God’s self-designation in the context of the book of Exodus. Although, Douglas K Stuart, William Albright, Michael Grisanti, Victor Hamilton and others have translated Exodus 3:14 and agreed on at least one point, which is that the Hebrew word *ehyeh*, which appears three times in this verse and is the cause of all the confusion that attends upon it, derives from the verb root *hayah* meaning ‘to be’. This single point of agreement is also where the consensus all but ends.

The attention to the syntactic, semantic, rhetorical, and narrative aspects of God’s name in itself and within its immediate context reveals a lot about the nature and attributes of God. Furthermore, the tracking of the revealed name evokes suspense, curiosity, and surprise dynamics in the book of Exodus as a whole. The fine and multiplied dynamism of God’s self-naming phrase, it is shown, turns the Exodus narrative into the embodiment of God’s name and the crucible of God’s narrative identity. Stafford when writing concerning the text reiterates that: “There are good reasons, however, for rejecting the LXX’s rendering as an accurate representation of the Semitic thought conveyed by ‘*ehyeh asher ehyeh*’ in Exodus 3:14, which thought is in the NWT expressed as “I shall prove to be what I shall prove to be.” The translation found in many other English versions assumes a present meaning for *ehyeh asher ehyeh* that is not well-founded” (Stafford 2012:15).

Spence and Excel (2011:57) opined that “the Septuagint explains rather than translates but it is otherwise unobjectionable”. For instance, the Septuagint translates *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14a into Greek as *ego eimi ho on*, which translates into English as “I am the one who is”, and it translates the

absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b as “*ho on*”, “*the one who is*”. This earliest of all translations of the Hebrew thus associates the revelation of Exodus 3:14 with the concept of absolute existence. It is especially noteworthy by virtue of being, to this day, one of the very few translations to interpret *eyheh asher ehyeh* as God’s Self-identification to Moses. It is also the first of many to recognise the absolute *ehyeh* as the Divine name in the verse. However, the Septuagint translation of the verse cannot be an exact rendering of the Hebrew because neither the form of words nor the actual words of the Greek translation allow for that possibility. The imperfect state Masoretic rendition of the four enigmatic words rendered as “I AM THAT I AM” could be re-read as “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” as it is in the verb Qal imperfect form of *hayah*.

The effects of these on the exegesis and hermeneutics of those words constitute exegetical, hermeneutical and theological inadequacy about God’s sovereignty. Therefore, the problem which this contribution will address is the contributory and correctional impact that re-reading of the Masoretic text of *eyheh asher ehyeh* will have on its interpretation and theological application.

Exodus 3:1-14: Perspective to various interpretations

The reason for diverse translation and interpretations stem from the fact that most scholars from the Septuagint, *ego eimi ho on*, I am the one who is, emphasise Yahweh as the only existing one. But this translation does not correspond to the Hebrew rendition. It merely explains rather than translate. Albright and Freedman contend that a causative form underlies the *hayah* form of the verb, but this is also a conjecture. The verb is in the qal stem and not the hiphil stem.

According to Dul, Exodus 3 was setting up the salvation event of the whole Old Testament; the deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian specifically Pharaoh. Israel had no means of escape from their bondage to the Egyptians. He opines that “God’s deliverance of Israel through Moses was the foundation for the nation of Israel knowledge of who God was and is, and for their faith and trust in Him” (2013:2). The passage expresses redemption and the salvation plan of God for the Israelites which He plans to achieve through Moses. As noted by Cole (1973:20-21), the name contained in this passage “...sums up itself all past revelation (for YHWH is still the ‘God of the fathers’, even if under a new

name), and it also lies at the very heart of their new experience of redemption and salvation.” God is seen as commissioning Moses to go and deliver His people from the bondage, He, however, promises Moses who according to Cole has learnt to distrust himself thoroughly that he will incur the wrath of God, His presence and that the task will be accomplished by Him.

Cole (1973:227) asserts that God answers Moses’ doubt when He answers his question concerning ‘What he will call His name when his people ask him’, however Cole opines that the answer given by God was a play on YHWH, God’s name, interpreting it as “... I will only be understood by my subsequent acts and words of revelation. This statement fits the biblical pattern of Israelite history. Cole’s perspective is that of God giving an assurance of divine intervention. This figure expresses “certain nuances of indeterminateness, totality, emphasis or intensity” (Grisanti 1997:1025). Cate (1979:28-33) opines concerning this passage that “God initiated the experience, He reveals Himself to us, and it was a personal experience to Moses. God’s warning to Moses never to draw near is an indication that sinners cannot approach Him.” Cate further argues concerning Moses’s question that “He was not asking hypothetical questions, rather He was voicing what he expected to be the natural reaction of his people. And needs something more than “Who” but “What” and opines that the given answer by God is full of meaning so that no human expression could ever sum it all up. God is consistent, can be relied upon and has unchanging nature.”

Zetzsche (2013:1) while explaining the slippery nature of words and the difficulty in pinning down its meaning notes concerning Exodus 3:14 “That’s all the more true for words that describe someone as mysterious as God. When Moses asked God to tell him his name, to reveal his identity, God told Moses what he needed to know: *ehyeh asher ehyeh* or “I Will Be What I Will Be” (Ex. 3:14).” He further iterates that “...as it turns out, this divine revelation in human language is insufficient, as the translation by Jewish translator Robert Alter illustrates. Alter notes that “rivers of ink have since flowed in theological reflection and philosophical analysis of this name,” which could also be translated as the more familiar “I Am That I Am,” “I Am He Who Endures,” and many other possibilities. With this view, Zetzsche and Alter canvassed for formal or dynamic equivalence translation and in other cases a translation that resonates with a modern interpreter.

Cronin notes that the church fathers and medieval scholars identified the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the Divine name that expresses the most fundamental essence of God, an essence that they identified as “subsistent being itself”. He reiterates further by quoting Ott that “the Patristic writers and schoolmen (Scholastics) accept the name of the divine Essence given in Ex.3:14, and regard Absolute Being as that concept by which we state the essence of God most fundamentally”.

Cronin further states that the works of Jerome, Augustine and Aquinas are among the early and medieval Christian contributions to the verse that are very important. He states that they saw it as an allusion to God’s absolute and eternal being. Augustine and Aquinas however identified the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a divine name using Septuagint and Vulgate respectively.

Cronin also proceeded to state the interpretation of the verse as offered by Brevard Childs. He offers a substantial and useful commentary on the call of Moses in the course of which he settles on an interpretation that appears to be a somewhat elaborated synthesis of the positions of others before him. He suggests that the *ehyeh* of 3:14b and *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a are statements of God’s unspecified intentions for Moses and Israel respectively, and thus settles on a generally temporal interpretation of the verse. More specifically he suggests that the *ehyeh* of 3:14 is a wordplay on the divine name YHWH and that *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a is “*paradoxically both an answer and a refusal to answer*” on God’s part and that God is here announcing “*that His intentions will be revealed in His future acts, which He now refuses to explain*”. However, Cronin had an issue with the interpretation given by Childs because according to him, it does not fully fit the occasion at hand. He proceeds to state the idea given by Noth as he notes the following about Noth’s work.

More interesting is Noth, who identifies the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a divine name, and even suggests that it “unmistakably hints at the name Yahweh in so far as an Israelite ear could immediately understand the transition from *ehyeh* to Yahweh merely as a transition from the first to the third person, so that the name Yahweh would be understood to mean ‘He is’”.

He however notes that Noth's interpretation approximates those of Recanati, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra who are Jewish scholars.

Pannell (2006:351-353) whose work on this passage especially verse 14 opines that either one or both of *ehyeh* is a cohortative and if that is the case "We have a divine resolution or emphatic wish-intention, perhaps as a result of an inward deliberation, in which God places stress on his own being" He stresses further that the emphasis is not on creation, action, or the like, per se; rather, it is an issue of self-determination or control over his own being, and further opines that another way of expressing this idea might be "No one controls me but me!"

Beitzel (1980:5-20) explaining this verse opines that "What kind of a God are you?" Moses queries, to which the Lord responds in kind, "I will be what I will be." And interpreted it to mean "God is affirming that in His essential character He will not be the product of human thought or manipulation, unlike the Egyptian deities with which the children of Israel would have been eminently familiar." This statement corroborates the interpretation offered by Pannell that no one can control God but rather He chooses what and who He wishes to be. Wenstrom (2011:20) corroborates this idea when he opines that "Yahweh is sovereignly independent of all creation and His presence signifies the fulfilment of the covenant." Radmacher, Allen and House (2004:41), in an attempt to interpret the meaning of the verse opines that "the one who spoke to Moses declared Himself to be the Eternal one – the uncaused and independent, and thus they see the I AM in the Absolute Sense.

The verse is also seen to have referred to as God's name and it is a name that expresses the truth that God has always existed and will always exist (Adeyemo 2006:91). However, Sacks sees in God's revelation to Moses an indication of His evolving nature, a reference to the future tense. He is unknowable beforehand. Even though God keeps His promises, reflecting His faithfulness, He is not predictable: He awaits us in the future (Sacks 2009:1).

Pink (1981:44) in his work, *Gleanings from Exodus*, argues that there is a depth concerning this verse which no finite mind can fathom. He opines that "I am that I am" announced that the great God is self-existent, beside whom there is none else. Without beginning, without end, "from everlasting to everlasting"

He is God. He is always the same, eternally changeless. Roosma (2009:15-17) however sees this verse as a verse that reveals God's relationship with humans which are the crown of his creation. The verse speaks of God's ever presence with people. Martin (2012:1) following the translation offered by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig also approves of this interpretation stressing that the "Being" of God is seen in being there with and for His people. Stafford (2012:8) considering the interpretation given by Gianoti who sees the verse as being futuristic opines that this verse can be seen as a promise of God to Israelites by saying that "God will become the solution to the need of the Israelites."

One thing is evident from the foregoing, that most of these translations and interpretations have set aside the formal dynamic equivalence theory of translation, which advocates a word-for-word or literal translation that attempts to transmit the message of one language in another language taking care not to alter the structure and form of the original language. They have tampered with the translation so that they could respond to the message within the context of their culture or Israelite history. The resulting translation seems to depend more on the presuppositions and commitments of the translators than it does on what methodology or theory they followed. Scholars are interpreting from a sense in which they are attempting to grasp the existential nature of God or his actions over space and time. Scholars must have over-stretched the theological significance of the root *hayah* to account for the diverse opinions.

A kernel literary analysis of Exodus 3:14

The text for this study is located in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible (Hill& Walton 2000:63). The book of Exodus is also the second book of the Jewish Hebrew Bible "*Tanak*", where it is called *weelleh shemoth* "And these are the names" and are usually shortened to *Shemoth*, "Names" (Hill& Walton, 81). The English title of the book *Exodus* "A going out" is gotten from the Septuagint and the Latin's Vulgate (Walvoord& Zuck 2000); this title captures the dominant theme of the book, 'a departure' or 'a going out', Exodus 19:1.

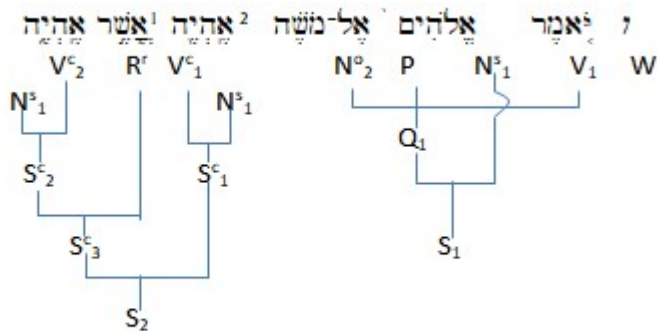
Exodus continues with Genesis's account. Clyde Francisco declares that the fact that book begins with a conjunction 'And' implies a strong link with the

first book of the Torah which continues a preceding narrative. Dillard and Longman III added that the opening phrase in the book restates a phrase in Genesis 46:8 in which both passages name the sons of Israel who migrated to Egypt during Joseph’s era (Francisco 1977:75). Even though Exodus continues the story of Genesis, there is, however, a large space of time between the two books. The ending of Genesis features a small extended (Jacob’s) family doing well in Egypt, however, at the dawn of Exodus the people have escalated to a large group living under malicious oppression (Longman III & Dillard 2007:63).

There are two main purposes for writing the book of Exodus: historical and theological. Historically, the book narrates the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from the tyranny of Pharaoh in Egypt, their transit to Mount Sinai and their nurture into nationhood. Theologically, it expresses the constitution of Israel; Cate (1987:149) suggests two focal points of the constitution. Firstly, “God’s redemption of Israel as a result of His free choice of them to be His people, and secondly His uniting Himself to them through the covenant at Sinai”. It highlights how God through love fulfil his age-long promise to Abraham by multiplying his descendant into a nation and renewing the covenant of grace on a national basis (Francisco, 76).

Kernel’s literary analysis of Exodus 3:14

Verse 14a:



And God said unto Moses, I will be who I will be

Step 1:

- (a) The elided object of the first verb V_1 (*He said*) is restored as N^s_1 , which is understood from the context to be “God.”
- (b) The subject of the elided copulative verb V^c_1 and V^c_2 (*I will be*) was elided and is restored as N^s_1 ; context reveals that its referent is “I, God will be”

From (b) above, verse 14a will be

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶ[אֱלֹהִים] הִנֵּה אֲשֶׁר אֶ[אֱלֹהִים] הִנֵּה

And He said God unto Moses, I [*God will be*] who I [*God will be*]

The dependent relationship before deletion takes place; the second shows the final result after deletion. Brackets enclose the redundant constituent that gets deleted.

- (c) Relative pronoun R^r signals the fact that subject of the copulative verb V^c_1 has a modifying verbal phrase (*I will be*)

Step 2:

- (a) Nouns N_1 (God) and N_2 have no modifiers and stand alone as an independent constituent.
- (b) The verb V has been granted first position prominence because of the Waw consecutive idiom, thus splitting the predicate.

Step 3:

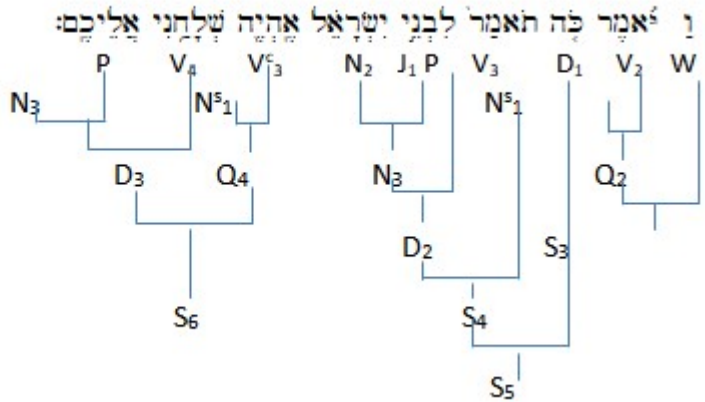
- (a) Noun phrase Ns_1 is the subject because it has grammatical concord with the verb; it follows the verb which has been granted first position prominence, is determinate, and the only candidate.
- (b) Noun N^o_2 (Moses) is the genitive object of verb V (*he said*) by means of preposition P (to/unto), declaring the recipient of the speech and forming the predicate Q (said to Moses).
- (c) The pronoun of the elided copulative verb of the sentence V^c_1 is restored then formed S^c_1

- (d) The pronoun of the elided copulative verb of the sentence V^c_2 is restored then formed S^c_2

Step 4:

- (a) Subject noun phrase N^s_1 and predicate Q form sentence S_1 .
 (b) The sentence S^c_2 and the R^f formed S^c_3 (Relative Clause)
 (c) The pronoun of the elided copulative verb of the sentence V^c_2 is restored then formed S^c_2
 (d) The pronoun of the elided copulative verb of the sentence V^c_2 is restored then formed S^c_2

Verse 14b:



Step 1:

- (a) The elided object of the first verb V_2 (*He said*) is restored as noun phrase N^s_1 , which is understood from the context to be “God.”
 (b) The subject of the elided copulative verb V^c_3 (*I will be*) was elided and is restored as N^s_1 ; context reveals that its referent is “I, God will be”

Step 2:

- (a) Noun N_2 (Sons) modifies construct noun J_1 (Sons), forming genitive noun phrase N_3 of menu

- (b) Noun phrase N3 is governed by preposition P, forming temporal adverbial phrase D2, specifying who the words were spoken to

Step 3:

- (a) Noun N3 (Sons of Israel) is the genitive object of verb V₃ (*he said*) by means of preposition P₂ (*to*), declaring the recipient of the speech and forming the predicate Q₃ (*said to Sons of Israel*).
- (b) The pronoun of the elided copulative verb of the sentence V^c₂ is restored then formed Q₄

Step 4:

- (a) Subject noun phrase N^s₁ and predicate Q form sentence S₁.
- (b) Adverb phrase D1 is an adjunct modifying sentence S2, specifying when the event of S5 happened.

Re-reading of the Masoretic text rendition of Exodus 3:14

In Exodus 3:14 the Masoretic word אֶהְיֶה is in the future tense which indicates a continuation of God's immanence. As stated by Robert Ellis (2006:222) in his book titled *Learning to Read Biblical Hebrew: An introductory Grammar*, under the connotation of verb tenses submits that,

... the perfect and imperfect tenses of the indicated verb do not convey the temporary ideas of past, present, or future in the way that English tenses do. Instead the Hebrew perfect typically indicates a completed action or state, while the imperfect usually indicates an incomplete action or state.

He further iterates that, "the perfect implies the perspectives of an outsider, viewing an event or state as a unity or whole from beginning to end, while the imperfect implies the perspectives of an insider, viewing an event or state as something that is unfolding." Also, James Price (2006:126-131), stated that the Imperfect aspect (specified by the imperfect conjugation) expresses incomplete action, state or relationship. The incomplete action may be due to various uncertainties (future time, non – indicative moods). Semantic content determines how the imperfect aspect is to be interpreted and translated with

respect to their various senses. An imperfect aspect could be timeless incomplete action, past time incomplete action, present time incomplete action or future time incomplete action.

Hence, from the above submissions, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, (*eyheh asher ehyeh*) Exodus 3:14 which is commonly interpreted as I AM that I AM, the אֶהְיֶה in verse 14 can be alternatively rendered as I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE, using the Formal Equivalence translation approach. This approach is applied by the writer in the view that it will ensure that the grammar, form and structure of the source language are retained rather than being altered.

Application of the re-reading

The implication of the re-reading of the biblical texts is to appreciate the spiritual insights that depend upon the words, and textual variants do not 'affect' or 'alter' or 'modify' doctrine. The only objective and justification of textual re-reading are that its emended text should give access to clearer insight and deeper faith. The text re-read does not imperil belief in God but it can and does contribute to the understanding of God as to His revelation and relation to man. Hence, the primary implication of this study for application is to understand that man is responsible for the way God reveals Himself to human beings. God who is awesome, trustworthy, infinite and self-existent, who has pre-existed will reveal himself to man as man has thought of him. In this text, he simply told Moses "The way you see me is who I will be. I will be who you say I am, whatever you say I am to you is what I am." As such God was saying to the extent to which you can conceive me is who I am to you.

From the text, only Yahweh uses the '*I will*' statement. This statement reveals the strength of God. Moses's *I am* statements, on the other hand, are expressions of his weakness. It is because of Moses' statements of weakness that Yahweh's *I will* statements are meaningful. The people's future depends upon their confidence in Yahweh's future.

The passage also suggests divine vulnerability, divine power, divine faithfulness, and divine presence. In making known his name, God makes known his resources which are available to all. Christians today may gain great courage from God's self-revelation to Moses in the wilderness. We can take

comfort that when He calls us to action, He is not sending us by ourselves. Rather, He Himself will go with us and give us the ability to carry out our work. We can rest in the knowledge that our success does not depend on who we are, nor will it be hindered by our past or the obstacles ahead. Instead, we may know that our success is directly linked to our connection with the all-powerful, all-consuming self-existing One.

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